Just Being

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Summary

"I dislike missing you," he said as the rustle returned, the newspaper folding, "but absence makes the heart grow fonder," Hannibal's right hand carded unexpectedly through his hair, making Will's eyes close in pleasure, "as they say."

Another series of timestamps for 'Il Faut Souffrir Pour Etre Beau', though they can be taken as stand alone stories. These will focus on Will and Hannibal's marriage, during the happier times before everything fell apart. As requested by the wonderful Lara and LovelyLeniece.

Distance/Intimacy

Cave-like. Dark, yet enough overspill from the open door to illuminate vague forms; the dresser in the corner, with the wardrobe tall and monolithic at its side; the hope chest, carved and ornate; the bottom of the white duvet cover embroidered with thick golden thread, drooping over the pine. Above it the bed, carrying within its care the long, sloping outline of a body.

On sock clad feet he walked carefully inside, leaving the door open like a lantern guide. The mattress gave comfortably beneath his hands as he climbed up, crawling over to settle behind the shape laying upon its side. One hand tucked up under his head, the other reaching out to trace the faintest outline of skin. *Shoulder blade*, he could feel, *up to the dusky hairs at the nape of his neck.*

The skin shivered and he smiled, listening as the breathing, which had been so silent, flared on a long inhale, then out in the same fashion. Leaning in, he followed the invisible line his fingers had left, of bone under skin with the tip of his nose, feeling his way up to the neck. A long breath in, *mirrored*, eyes open and hand straying to curl across the supine body pressed to him.

“You showered when you got home?” Will asked as he felt the body beside him wake, “I didn’t hear you.”

A soft, sleepy laugh from behind closed lips. Next to him, Hannibal rolled slowly onto his back, giving Will time to accommodate for the shift. The barest hint of eyes were caught in the faint light, opening with three steady blinks.

Three weeks. It had been three weeks of only moments spent together. Will felt as if he were caught in a bizarre limbo-like cycle in which his husband was constantly almost out of reach. Here, curled together, he couldn’t focus on it too closely. Will lifted his hand to brush the hair from Hannibal’s forehead, fingers lingering on the soft skin beside his ear. Barest hint of a smile on full lips.

“Still tired?” Will asked gently.

“I am sure I have slept enough,” Hannibal’s voice was thick and husky.

“When’s your flight again?”

“Six thirty this evening. Time will soon be difficult to deal with, I fear.”

“Only a couple of hours to Chicago,” Will said, tracing his fingers down the curve of Hannibal’s arm.

“Peirce wishes to take me to dinner when I land,” Hannibal explained with little enthusiasm, rubbing at his closed eyes with rough fingers, “Unfortunately we are at the same hotel for the conference. Enough of an excuse for socialising.”

“Not Thomas Pierce?” Will said with a frown; Hannibal’s soft sigh was his reply, “I didn’t know it was possible to physically be bored to tears, but last time I talked to him I think I was close. Which was at your boss's dinner, wasn’t it?” Hannibal nodded, lifting his left hand to take Will’s own, his fingers chill to the touch, “I’ll never forgive her for those damned place settings. Also,” he added with a small smile, “he clearly has a thing for you.”

“I am well aware,” Hannibal said, lazily running his long fingers over Will’s wrist.

“I’ll have to lay here, fearing for my marriage,” Will said airily, “while Thomas Pierce steals your heart with his in depth analysis of hospital insurance loopholes and the last twenty five cases he’s scored and how he’ll become partner soon, he’s sure, and...dear god that man was dull.”

“You are far too awake,” Hannibal said softly as he stared at the Will from the gloom.

“You won’t be saying that when I tell you I’ve been up long enough to bake the sourdough,” Will said, “and go out for eggs and sausage.”

A moment of quiet, then a shuffling as Hannibal rolled onto his side, facing him. Will laughed quietly as a strong arm hooked him and pulled him close, a mouth rushing to the soft flesh of his throat to scrape sharp canines across the sensitive patch. Always a possessively dominant reaction when Will successfully predicted him.

“My darling, what would I do without you?”

“Make your own breakfast?” Will suggested.

“I would trust no other hands to serve me.”

“I’m sure that sounded more romantic in your head,” Will said, amused, even as Hannibal gripped him tightly.

Laying half atop him, Hannibal fit his head under Will’s chin and puffed hot breath against his clavicle. *Warm and safe*, was all Will could think as he ran his hand through the soft strands of Hannibal’s hair, *safe and content*. Only six months ago just the thought of this being his reaction to an alpha would have made Will Graham laugh in your face; or bring you down to size with a few choice words. Now, he refused to admit it as hypocrisy and instead labelled it a turn of fate.

Will didn’t consider himself ‘caught and tamed’, mainly because their marriage was hardly conventional. Two halves, that was how Will saw them, two broken halves all patched together. No one else would fit quite right.

“I’m going downstairs,” he kissed the top of Hannibal’s head and then sat up as Hannibal rolled onto his back once more, “give it about seven minutes.”

The blood sausage was thick and brown, and sizzled aromatically in the olive oil. The trip to the butchers that morning had been tipped with excitement. Hannibal had been working himself ragged these past few weeks, what with a large reshuffle at the hospital after the

retirement of the head of the surgical department. Lots of politics and position snapping, enough that it reminded Will of FBI interdepartmental power struggles he'd always done his best to avoid.

Always coming home tired, sleeping until noon or after, and then working on reports and propositions and *other* people's paperwork or responding to emails. So much so that it was mainly work, lunch, more work and then dinner before Hannibal was back on the night shift. He wouldn't call it lonely, because that wasn't quite accurate; helpless. Will felt a little helpless, in the face of it all.

So making the sourdough had been pleasing, as had buying the blood sausage and the pale blue duck eggs from their friendly local butcher, *Hannibal was a long time customer and Will had been adopted by association*. Now the eggs cooked in big, fat misshapes, sprinkled with marjoram, nestled in with the sausage and crisping chunks of bread. He was just serving when Hannibal walked in dressed in his heavy green housecoat and took his place at the table, hair run through with fingers rather than a comb.

"Thank you," he said genuinely as Will set the plate before him.

"Coffee or tea? I made both."

"Coffee, please."

Will handed him a cup of black, bitter coffee, poured himself some broken orange pekoe and, once everything was in its place, sat down at his own plate. The first mouthful was warm, succulent but with a crunch of fried bread and the sweet, headiness of the marjoram. Across from him, Hannibal was enjoying his food; Will could tell because his eyes were closed as he chewed, head held perfectly straight, and his coffee was as yet untouched.

A surge of warmth had him taking a drink of his tea. There was still an underlying resentment for such feelings. The very idea that serving his alpha could bring out that euphoria sickened him. Will continually had to re-evaluate his thoughts, set them out and analyse them. Only then could he be happy with the idea that the happiness came from somewhere other than a lowly biological reaction.

Hannibal never reacted this way with anyone else. The thought allowed him to reinstate his previous thoughts. *Two halves of one whole*.

"Good?" he asked, cutting through the yolk and watching it spill.

"An understatement, darling. I feel my body has been craving protein, but recently I have been taking it like medicine. No time for taste. This," he said, spearing a sliver of sausage, "is truly food for the soul. Did you go to Grossets?"

"Mmm," Will nodded, humming before he swallowed, "He asked how you were. Made me realise you haven't been there yourself in a while."

"I find my time unsavoury," Hannibal sighed, wiping his mouth with a heavy napkin, "small people scurrying around me, doing small things with small results. Still, it is necessary in the

grand scheme."

"It better be," Will said, making Hannibal look to him curiously, "or I'd be down there myself asking Marissa why I've barely seen you for twenty days. It's not just the butcher that's been missing you, you know."

"And how would you ask her?" Hannibal inquired.

"Physically," Will said, just on the wrong side of dark.

A warm but knowing smile graced Hannibal's lips. It had been a minefield, when they'd first met, disentangling the myriad of subtle expressions the man shifted through like water through cracks; almost imperceptible, but noticeable nonetheless, and over time creating streams and rivers big enough to see clearly. Hannibal was a surprisingly private person, despite his seeming love for the social animal. It was an endless amusement for Will to see the polite but disinterested visage of his mate scan the populous at large, only alighting on very few with a spark of genuine curiosity.

And only on one with single minded attention. Will knew the look Hannibal adopted across the dining room table. He wore it often nowadays. *Satisfaction*.

"Such poetry to your imagination," Hannibal said, then his eyes sparked abruptly as if remembering something, "ah, but I had meant to ask last night, about your consultation yesterday. How was it?"

"Oh. Right. Well..." Will scratched at his forehead and suddenly didn't feel like eating, "it wasn't exactly productive."

"Dr. Findlay came with a high recommendation," Hannibal said, looking a little put out.

"Well, I mean he was a nice guy," Will shrugged, trying his best, "but he didn't have anything new to bring to the table. Just like all the others, really. He diagnosed that my prolonged use of suppressants has created problems with hormones, halting ovulation," Will knew he was reciting the words mechanically, as if distancing himself from the problem with terminology would make it easier, "he suggested the same hormone therapies I took last time. The ones that didn't work."

"I see. No other suggestions?"

"Adoption," Will said wryly, giving Hannibal a challenging stare, "or surgery."

"Of which all procedures' risks far outweigh the benefits. I would not see you under the knife for this."

"I agree," Will nodded, even as his eager hormones wished for any reprieve from this barren future.

"Then I will make sure to keep an eye out at the conference, in case anything useful arises," Hannibal said, "medical science never stands still."

The fact that he treated it with a certain amount of casualness made Will relax, even as he couldn't help but worry, deep down. His husband never made a big deal of the revelation of yet another failed attempt. Yet the irritating feeling of worry was still there in Will's mind, that Hannibal deserved someone who could give him a child, a future. *Would you stop him if he left?* The question wasn't considered for long, dismissed as quickly as it always was.

"Thanks."

"Never feel the need to thank me, darling."

"Ok, eleven down. Shoenberg's 'Moses and something'. Four letters, second is r," Will drew out the last letter a little as he stuck the top of the stylus in his mouth and ran it over his teeth absently.

Against his back Hannibal moved minutely in his slight slouch, bringing his arm up to wrap it around Will's waist. In return Will nestled further as he lay on the couch with his legs sprawled and his feet on the arm rest, pressed against Hannibal's side. Will could feel breath tickling through his hair as Hannibal leaned his face down to look at the back-lit surface of the tablet in Will's hands; *he could imagine the ever so slight narrowing of eyes, staring head height off into a room somewhere in his vast palace*. There was a rustle as Hannibal adjusted the newspaper on his knees and the breath disappeared.

"Aron," he said after another pause, his fingers splaying and retracting over Will's stomach.

"I'll take your word for it," Will said as he drew it in messily, "find anything interesting on at the Lyric for when you get back?"

"Nothing jumps out at me," Hannibal replied.

"I thought you said Fidelio was coming in October?"

"Cancelled. The soprano has contracted laryngitis; normally puts them out of play for weeks. I feel it is a typical example of my luck nowadays."

"I'll find something," Will said as he started on *twenty four down: Oswego tea, four letters, second 'a' – mind rummaging quickly and efficiently through his neatly filed alphabet, fingers flicking through pictures and memories of scents and tastes and related subjects* even as his own tapped against his leg rhythmically, *coming to it as it emerged in his mind, remembering drinking it when he was younger to calm a fever, taken as medicine, different names known under: also known as Bee balm, or blue balm.* He made a soft sound and twirled the stylus into a good hold as he wrote 'balm' into the blank white spaces, "there's always something."

"Coming home to you is enough of a treat, darling."

The line was enough to make him laugh absently, taking a moment to focus on the hand against his abdomen, its soothing rhythm pulsing like a heartbeat. The sorts of words he should despise for their placation, but instead accepted for their truth.

“Smooth talker.”

“You must give me some practice,” Hannibal said, the rustling returning along with a waft of air against his right arm as the newspaper was turned over, “I will need to be sufficiently charming at this conference. Didera Callis is attending on the second and third days. I am adamant to ensnare her.”

“Callis, Callis,” Will repeated the name as he continued his puzzle, “I recognise that name. Is she Health Board?”

“Senior Vice President and Chief Medical Officer of St James. A be all and end all sort.”

“Yes, I remember,” *twenty two across, insect catcher, three letters:* ‘net’, the stylus squiggled; Will sounded dry as he spoke, “she’s one of the ladder riders, as you so nicely put it.”

“There was a modicum of nepotism in how she was chosen for her post. Still, I am willing to exploit myself for the sake of an unfair tactic. Though I will be taken on merit rather than connections. Head of surgery is still up in the air, and I know they have candidates chosen.”

“They’ll lose what little respect I have for them if they pass you over for heading up the unit.”

“Your support is welcome,” Hannibal’s voice was tinged with familiar warmth.

“I only endorse what I’ve already tested.”

“Then I am glad I’ve made such a good impression,” Hannibal said, amused; the hand continued its hypnotic tempo, only stuttering when Will took his stylus in his lips and reached down to run his fingers over the back of Hannibal’s hand, light enough to barely tickle the fine hairs.

“Now you’re just fishing for compliments,” Will smiled, mumbling around the stylus tucked into the corner of his mouth, “Twenty eight across, father of King Hadad, Genisis thirty six, thirty five. I’ve got the last letter as d.”

“Bedad,” Hannibal said without missing a beat, continuing as if by rote, “before there reigned any king of the Israelites. His name is oddly fitting.”

“Oh?” Will asked as he wrote it almost unintelligibly with his left hand.

“It means solitary, alone.”

“Don’t go all sentimental on me,” Will said wryly, even as he linked his fingers with Hannibal’s when the other sought his touch.

“I dislike missing you,” he said as the rustle returned, the newspaper folding, “but absence makes the heart grow fonder,” Hannibal’s right hand carded unexpectedly through his hair, making Will’s eyes close in pleasure, “as they say.”

It was enough, in that moment. Feeling, Will had found, was a constant between them, whether it be touch, sight, talk, memory, sharing, *just-being*. There was a resonance, an understanding simple enough to give them both peace. As Will sighed comfortably, Hannibal’s long fingers trailing his scalp to leave a disorder of curls and waves in his wake, that same link resonated like a tightly pulled string. Bound and tied with a tight knot, enough that even compounded human experience encapsulated in a neat little proverb couldn’t truly do it justice. Not for Will.

“What time is it?” he asked, his voice thick with contentment and pleasure.

“Nearly three.”

The contented feeling slipped slightly but caused greater damage than it should, the fault line of their touch shifting by a mere centimetre, enough to cause an earthquake. Enough to tear and topple. *Don’t go all sentimental on me*. Will wished his words could be closer to the truth.

“I’ll make you something for the plane,” Will said suddenly, sitting up to put his tablet on the table and then stand, feeling antsy and out of place, “even first class food is plastic crap these days. There’s leftover roast beef from last night. I’ll make you some of that Vietnamese anise thing you liked the other month. We’ve got rice, cardamoms. I’ll put it in a tub. Sound ok?”

In answer Hannibal put his newspaper onto the coffee table, perfectly aligned with the right angle of the corner, and stood to kiss him. *Always the sort of answer Will resented and yet longed for.* A last kiss for a while now. Will held onto it.

“Smooth in more ways than just talking are we?” Will murmured against soft lips as Hannibal stayed close, noses bumping, “Hope you’re not practicing this technique too.”

“Heaven forbid,” Hannibal smiled with the right side of his mouth, eyes bright and alive, watching him intently.

It had started raining by the time they’d bundled into Will’s Volvo truck and headed for Baltimore Washington International. The windscreen wipers made an irritating whine as they wiped the steady droplets to the side, a waterfall of colour caught from passing headlamps and traffic lights.

“I’d say I hope you get better weather,” Will said, looking up to the glum sky, making night seem quicker what with the heavy clouds blocking the sky, “but you’ll be stuck in the conference centre. Probably for the best, the forecast is pretty horrendous for the next few days.”

Which was when he realised he was talking about the weather and forced himself to stop. Hannibal stayed quiet, even as Will could see him glancing surreptitiously at him whenever he thought Will wasn't looking. The lights changed and Will pulled out, turning right with a few other cars to head along the curving tarmac to the departures entrance. Above them planes landed and took off in the miserable air. Will listened to the thump and whine of the wipers and chewed at the inside of his bottom lip.

Departures was a little crowded, forcing them out from under the protection of the building's purpose built roof.

"Just give it a few minutes," Will said, "someone'll move."

"We're later than I thought," Hannibal said, checking his watch, "I should have considered the weather."

"It's only..." Will looked at the little clock on his dashboard and read it aloud, "five to six. Shit. Sorry, I didn't realise," he dragged his hand across his face roughly; the antsy feeling still hadn't left.

"No harm done, darling," Hannibal said softly, reaching up to touch his arm; Will leaned in and allowed the kiss, awkward as it was over the gear stick. It lingered and Will found himself running his hand over Hannibal's hair, down onto the skin of his throat above his shirt collar.

"You should go, in case they stop you at security again."

"That was a simple case of mistaken identity," Hannibal said with equal amounts reproach and delight.

"They did apologise," Will said, smiling, "if it happens again maybe you can wangle a few free flights out of them as compensation."

"If it happens again," Hannibal said, tone a little dry, "I will be convinced I have a doppelganger."

"Call me when you land?" Will said as Hannibal opened the door out into the rain, the sounds of airport tannoys and cars filtering over the sound of the wipers and the weather.

"I will," Hannibal said as Will handed him his bags, "Goodbye, dearest."

"Bye."

The drive home seemed a little cold and too quiet, even though they'd hardly talked on the journey there. Little things were missing, the soft breathing, the shift of material, the subtle scent of Hannibal's cologne and his heady musk. The seat beside him felt absent.

On coming home Will decided not to judge himself on the fact that the first thing he did was go to their room, find Hannibal's green, heavy wool jumper he'd been wearing for the past few days, and slip into it.

He fell asleep on the sofa a few hours later after a meager dinner of leftovers, some program he hadn't been paying attention to on BBC America about the Celts playing unnoticed on the television, the neck of the jumper pulled up over his chin and mouth.

Content, but alone.

By the sixth ring, Will was biting at his thumb nail.

"Come on," he muttered softly to no one, rolling over to lie on his back and stare at the ceiling.

It had been a slow day, enough to leave him feeling more bereft than he was sure was reasonable. It had started promising, with approval coming through for his research grant, but then had fallen down when he realised it would take three weeks to process. No way to start anything big, no way to go ahead with the things he did have planned, and he knew he should be planning out the budget for his project but...

He didn't feel up to it. Things were too quiet. The house was empty from room to room. He'd gone for a walk to their local park to eat his lunch, but the presence of other people became an irritant. The bright sunshine had attracted families and children ran across the grass unheeded by others, screaming and shouting. Watching them had felt like staring at his own inadequacy.

The feeling was always there, *that he'd done this to himself*. The suppressants had been a part of his life since he was sixteen, making it possible to function as an unbonded omega in a world where that was truly not an option, and only now, after years of faithful service, had they betrayed him.

Will hadn't been able to stand looking at the little girl climbing the tree or the three little boys throwing bread into the duck pond. *Would you stop him if he left?* the question kept returning, no matter how many times he shooed it away. He felt heavier when he returned. The house was quiet. Two days without another voice within its walls was seeming like an age.

"Come *on*, pick up," Will said a little more forcefully, sitting up in bed and shivering as the blankets fell away from his bare chest; it was as he was leaning awkwardly off the bed to reach for the wool jumper that the rings stopped. Will grabbed the garment and sat up quickly, hoping he didn't sound too eager when he said, "Hannibal?"

"Hello? Is that Will?"

A stranger's voice. Will stalled, fingers tight around the jumper in his fist. The sound of voices in the background. A strange sort of anxiety rose in his chest.

"Yes," he said, feeling utterly lost, "who is this?"

"It's Tom. Tom Pierce. We met at Marissa's dinner the other month?"

“Uh huh.”

“Right, well, I just thought I’d answer and tell you Hannibal’s indisposed at the moment. You want me to tell him you called?”

“Yes,” Will said, adding “please,” when he realised how blunt he sounded.

“Ok,” Tom sounded forcibly cheerful, “Well, it was nice to hear from you again.”

Will hung up. The phone found itself chucked unceremoniously onto the floor. The jumper followed soon after. Curling up to sleep was the only thing he did find easy that day.

Ringing woke him. An automatic, floundering hand made for the side table but found nothing. Only as the ringing stopped did Will become compos mentis enough to remember it was coming from the floor.

“Shit,” he muttered, hissing at the cold as he left the warmth of the heavy duvet just as the phone began to ring once more, lighting up the like a firefly on the carpet.

He grabbed it quickly and retreated to the bed, snuggling down into the pillows before answering.

“Hello?”

“Darling,” Hannibal’s voice.

“Where the hell have you been?” ground out in a muffled voice before Will could think about how surly it sounded.

“Apologies,” Hannibal said, undeterred, “I was indisposed at dinner when you called. A frightful affair. Pierce recommended a local restaurant,” Will found himself relaxing as Hannibal spoke, even as he tried to keep his irritation close at hand, “Inedible would be putting it mildly.”

“He took you to dinner *again*?”

“I fear I may have underestimated the thing he apparently has for me.”

“I should have told him to fuck off while I had the chance,” Will said tiredly.

“I could pass on the message,” Hannibal said, amused.

“Feel free,” Will found himself laughing softly.

“So, I ordered room service on my return and have just finished taking a well needed shower, and it is now,” a pause while Hannibal checked, “half past eleven, and I wish I were home with you rather than lying in this sterile room.”

“I thought they booked you the suite?” Will said, even as he smiled at the sentiment; the anxiety was shrivelling like grapes in the sun. *The voice kept him close, enough to ignore the more difficult questions.*

“They did,” Hannibal said as explanation.

“Oh. Well,” he cleared his throat, “Is the conference going well?”

“Very well, but that isn’t why you called me.”

“No, I guess it wasn’t.”

“Are you using the weighted duvet I left?”

“Mm hmm.”

“I had hoped you would like it. Is it helping?”

“A little. And I do like it. What time’s your flight on Friday?”

“Ten past eight in the evening.”

“Remind me to tell whoever booked your flights to fuck off as well, will you?”

“Of course.”

“I miss you. Been missing you all day.”

“Do you miss me now?”

“Bits of you,” Will said softly, shivering as his skin prickled at the timbre and quality of Hannibal’s voice, changing subtly.

“Care to elaborate?”

“Are you trying to seduce me, Dr. Lecter?”

“I was not aware I had to.”

A soft exhalation of breath, eyes closing, touch heightening, “You could always try.”

Over the phone, Hannibal’s sibilants took on a slightly slushier quality than usual, mixing with the consonants and vowels to create a flowing glide of language akin to waves upon the shore. Will listened and allowed it to wash across his skin, hairs rising on cue. Hannibal was not one to voice his feelings without recourse, and Will knew that he must understand the need in him, the need to feel close while so far apart.

Loneliness. Anxiety.

“How would you have the sorely missed parts of myself seduce you, darling?”

An abrupt laugh, “Are we doing the dirty phone call thing now? This is a turn up for the books.”

“You always exposit on your overactive imagination. Perhaps I am simply exploiting it.”

Still smiling, “Hands,” Will admitted, swallowing, “I...like your hands. Like it when you...” he cleared his throat and tried to shy away from the embarrassing vulnerability of voicing his desires, and fall closer to the freedom of speaking them in an empty room, “when you touch me.”

“Where, darling?”

“The-the insides of my thighs.”

“I always hold you when I do,” Hannibal sounded reminiscent, “from behind. Pulled tight against me, to keep you close.”

Imagining was nearly good enough, but pulling the duvet down behind him in a piled up mess and pushing back against it fueled the fantasy. Will could imagine the weight behind him had breath of its own, warm and hard as the long fingered hand slid down between his legs to press against the soft skin of his inner thigh.

“You’re warm,” Will continued, part memory, part desire, “And you kiss at my neck, always when you get your chance.”

“Only when you bare it for me.”

“Only for you,” Will breathed out as his hand slid up, the sensitive skin of his wrist pressing across his half hard cock even as his fingers continued to tease the sensitive skin beneath.

“Of course,” Hannibal said, his voice tuning dark, slickly dangerous, “because you are mine.”

“Yes, always,” just above a whisper, “always.”

“What would you have of me?”

“Your teeth a-against my throat and...and my leg,” Will thought he could feel the tight grip of a hand at his knee, lifting it roughly, “you pull it back, over your waist. You expose me like no other can. You see me.”

“My beautiful darling. That you offer yourself is enough. I would give you pleasure. Tell me how.”

“Inside,” Will insisted, “I want your wonderful hands in me. You always know just where to touch,” his voice hitched as Hannibal interrupted swiftly, three words that went straight to his crotch.

“Caress yourself darling.”

It was impossible to disobey, and the disconnect was electrifying even as it was bizarre. It was his hand reached down, across his chest, his abdomen, past the tuft of curling hair and his eager penis, and yet it was Hannibal's fingers that entered him. As they slid inside Will thought he could feel his mate's breath against his face as he pressed his cheek to the phone to catch the words seeping through.

"Always a spectacle, to watch you lose yourself. Bliss leaves you undone, vulnerable to me. I wish to open you like a gift. Touch deep where no other can. Would you give yourself to me, dearest?"

"A little late for that," Will breathed heavily as the three long fingers rocked inside, drawing jolts of pleasure with every curl, twist and thrust, "you're everything to me."

"Will, how you know me. I would have us together for as long as there is breath in us. For as long as my hands can touch you and bring sweet sounds to your lips," Will slid the fingers deeper, catching a moan in his throat with mixed success, on his back, legs splayed up and over the rolling duvet, "for as long as you would allow me see you unmasked. For as long as you will let me inside."

"You feel so good," Will said softly, mindlessly, face hot even as the cool air caught the sweat on his flesh, chilling his skin, "so close."

"I am sure I have two hands, dear Will."

"Hannibal..."

"I would have myself take you within and without."

The phone lay beside him, a lamplight in the dark, as Will wrapped his freed left hand around his weeping cock and bit out a soft, croaky groan, while the other continued down between his legs. An imagined heat spilled from his right side, where the duvet pressed, *where Hannibal's toned flesh pressed*, warming him. The warm, smooth metal of his wedding ring slid against the soft skin, making him jolt and shake at the added sensation.

"Such smooth skin," the voice seemed clandestine as it radiated from the small speaker, "You blush, so fresh and free when I tease my fingers against it," Will bit down on his bottom lip, the sharp pain keeping him grounded, "Blood rushing, it makes you alive in this moment, even as it is dubbed *la petite mort*," the roughness Hannibal gave to the silky words made him shiver and his breathing quicken, "I would have you die a little for me," Will felt his world spiral in anticipation of the word, "*darling.*"

"I can't..."

But the words were untrue, for he could, and did. Will rode out the orgasm to the feeling of Hannibal surrounding him, holding him close, touching him inside and out, sweet words against his throat, knowing him so utterly as to be able to touch him over hundreds of miles without so much as a stutter.

When the high slid down, and down, Will realised he was laying in the dark, cold and wet. It was difficult to care. Wiping his hand across the sheets, *he could launder them tomorrow*, he grabbed the phone and pulled the duvet up and over him, nesting underneath until his head was absorbed down into the puffy mass.

Hannibal's voice was ineluctably vainglorious, "Well, was it good for you too?"

Closing his eyes and opening them, Will hummed, even as the euphoria of the act gave way to the reality of his situation.

"Can't wait till you come home and show me the real thing. I'm sure you'd have some adjustments."

"Nor can I. Experiences with you are always virginal in their opportunities."

"You know I'm not as innocent as you presume," Will said, curling further in on himself.

"It is your innocence that I admire for its resilience, even as much of you gives in to the call of your subconscious desires. And I do so enjoy watching you give in."

"Trying to corrupt me?" Will asked, jokingly.

"I think it's a little late for that," Hannibal said with a smiling tone as he parroted Will's words back at him, "but I accept you."

"All of me?" the itching anxiety nipped, returning to swamp the tingling contentment.

"Whatever it may be."

"Even if I can't have kids?" the words blurted out without the ability to keep them in, and the anxiety flared high and threatening.

"I do believe you alone are more than enough for me, darling," said without hesitation or placation; a simple, true statement, "even if it were to be this, mere words between us for the rest of our lives, nothing could desecrate what we share."

"How did I get this fucking lucky?" Will asked hypothetically, his hand rubbing at the light pain in his chest; *everything seemed so fragile, yet made strong by confident words spoken in earnest*.

"I sometimes ask myself the same thing," came the reciprocation, "sans crude language."

"Oh of course," Will said, smiling.

"Of course, darling."

"God," Will said, looking at the screen of his phone to see the time, anything to change the subject, "it's after twelve. Do you have any early seminars?"

"There is a talk at nine on advanced surgical polymers I was tempted to attend."

“Then you should sleep. I know how you hate mornings,” Will said, feeling his heart tighten at the thought of hanging up, “I’m...I’m sorry I kept you up.”

“Oh? I’m not.”

“Hannibal,” said with affectionate scorn, “you’re a prurient hedonist at heart.”

“Only for your skin, dearest.”

“Get off the phone,” Will laughed, shivering at the memory, “Oh, and pass on my message to Pierce would you? Maybe it’ll discourage him from taking you to any more lousy dinners.”

“An interesting theory. I will test it.”

A pause, where neither spoke and yet nor did they leave. Just steady, soft breathing and the idea, the concept of a presence kept close by the open connection. The ever subtle fear kept at him, skulking in the background even as it had been dismissed by Hannibal’s sure words. *Would you stop him if he left?* Will hated that the doubt lingered.

“I don’t want you to go just yet,” he admitted after a long pause.

“Then I will be here, until you sleep.”

“You don’t have to...”

“And yet I wish to. Sleep, darling. I will be here.”

The phone lay beside him, beneath the heavy duvet, like a hand reaching out. *They lay together, and for once he could not care enough to chastise himself for the need and the want to feel close to his mate, nor resent himself for his lack of foresight, nor others for their proximity and his distance.* Will felt the touch of the light upon his skin, and knew that the doubt would fade in time. Just as everything did, eventually.

But Hannibal would be there, always, *until he slept*.

Illustration/Action

The quiet hum of the floor buffer, mixed with the staccato beat of a single pair of clicking heels and rolling wheels, had Will covering a yawn. The chair wasn't comfortable, not by a long shot. It was plastic, organically shaped to appear relaxing but be utterly useless in testing; it bit into his shoulders and slipped away at the small of his back, pushing him to a contorted angle.

Still, even uncomfortable furniture couldn't stop his eyes from closing, chin drooping to his chest, listening and listening to the breathing drone of the airport at night. *Shouldn't be long now,* his optimism perked up. Will wished he could hold onto it. His hands were itching so much he'd had to force himself to stop scratching the back of the left before he broke the skin.

So near and yet so far. Kept apart by bad weather and bureaucracy.

He yawned and finished the lukewarm coffee he'd bought to keep him awake and distracted. A few rows down from him the man sleeping on the chairs, covered by his fleece, snored loudly. The other seats stood like a game of Guess Who? with the heads and shoulders of the four remaining people only just visible above the blue plastic headrests; two business men, a middle aged blonde with a kind face and a teenager plugged into her phone, scrolling with an aimless expression as she constantly pushed her long hair behind her ear. The cleaner with his buffer floated over by the cafe, every now and then pulling on a just visible electronic cigarette and looking at his watch. Will stared at him aimlessly for a while, as if seeing an odd refrain from a dance routine.

The tannoy announcement rang out like a sermon*: Good evening passengers, this is a boarding call for flight 2072 to Cleveland. Would all passengers for this flight make their way to gate three. Please have your identification and boarding pass ready for inspection.*

Across the mainly empty area some people stood from chairs, seats on bags, emerged from places Will hadn't even seen, and made their weary way. Looking up at the flight board, Will sighed.

Delays made the world stand still. *And his nerves overwork.*

He stood up, but walking only heightened his cavernous surroundings. Still, anything was better than that chair. Or falling asleep in it. After his third circuit and second cup of black coffee, Will looked up at the board to find,

Chicago - Southwest – 3438 – A3 - Expected 00:45

Checking the digital clock gave him *00:29* and his body woke up to the thought, even as his cynicism read *expected* and refused to believe the hype. *And then there's miles of corridors and waiting for luggage,* he thought. Still, he made his way from the warm, semi-comfortable, catered Departures, to the dearth of Arrivals. At least they didn't have uncomfortable chairs to lure the unsuspecting.

It was another fifty minutes until anyone showed. By then Will was leaning against the railing by the ramps leading down to the waiting area, watching the wide entranceway avidly as the weary flight rolled in. Singling Hannibal out from the crowd wasn't difficult; he was the only one looking as if he'd just dressed that morning, his dark brown suit and blue shirt utterly immaculate, heavy overcoat draped over one arm, bag held with the other.

Eyes searched him out, meeting quickly. *A small smile and a raise of the hand.*

Will made his way slowly to the left ramp as Hannibal descended with the other weary travellers, even as his itching hands willed him faster. No words were necessary, all spoken by action alone.

Hannibal put down his bag and hung his coat on the rail, touching Will's right arm softly: *You did not need to wait for me*.

Will shifted close, closer, until he was pressed against Hannibal's chest, hands in his pockets, forehead resting down against his shoulder: *I wanted to.*

Hannibal's arms lifted to hold him close, forcing a small smile from Will as he let loose a contented sound; neither did public affection, except in mitigating circumstances: *I missed you, darling*.

Will returned the embrace tightly, curling his fingers into the immaculate suit jacket, pressed his face to Hannibal's neck and kissed the scented skin above the starched collar: *Next time I'm coming with you.*

On pulling back Hannibal lifted his right hand to stifle a yawn, clearing his throat as Will laughed softly.

"Didn't sleep on the plane?" he asked.

"They refused to turn down the lights," Hannibal said as he gathered his things and they began the walk to the exit.

"And you're always so adamant first class is worth the price. Just as useless as economy when it comes down to it."

"Useless, yes. But for a measly extra fee I will take the extended leg room and not being sardined into my seat."

"*Measly*," Will shook his head and didn't comment further, "did they feed you at least?"

"Yes, though I'm not sure if it was food in the strictest sense."

"I made chicken chasseur, it's in the slow cooker."

"After five days of substandard restaurant fare and airplane meals, I can barely contain myself."

“Keep your wise cracks to yourself,” Will said with a smile and a sidelong glance as they exited through the sliding doors, “I’m parked up to the right, by the taxis.”

The house seemed warmer on their return, and the quick dinner, even at one fifty in the morning, seemed more filling. *Home seemed like home again.* Will dumped the dishes in the sink and badgered his antsy husband upstairs with a promise of *I’ll do them in the morning*, to which Hannibal pedantically noted that it was morning, to which Will leaned up to kiss him with what little energy he had left.

“Take me to bed,” he said softly against Hannibal’s lips.

“As you wish,” Hannibal replied softly, eyeing the dishes narrowly as they left the kitchen.

Stripping down was quick and messy for Will, *jeans and shirt and underwear dropped onto the chair by his dresser in a heap,* and slow and meticulous for Hannibal, *shirt and suit and underclothes folded and stacked in the pile for dry cleaning by the laundry hamper*. Will was already under the covers and half asleep by the time Hannibal joined him, sliding close and gathering Will into his arms.

“Did you turn off the alarm?” Will slurred sleepily against Hannibal’s chest.

“Well remembered,” Hannibal said, leaning back and to the left, letting in the chill; Will curled closer as he listened to Hannibal fiddle with the clock, moaning contentedly as he was once more pulled close.

Nestled together, Will allowed himself to drift. It was as he listened to the soft breathing from above, the pulse of a warm heartbeat beneath his ear and the feel of strong arms against his body that he realised the back of his left hand was sore.

But it no longer itched.

“You can’t even wait till after breakfast?”

“I would have thought that on some level this constituted a meal.”

“You’re fucking incorrigible, you know that? Stop it, come on it’s already half twelve and-for crying out *loud*...”

“Your mouth says words your body does not hear. How indecorous.”

“I-*uh*- we-*fuck*- we need to get up.”

“I thought I was up, as you so delightfully put it.”

Unable to stifle the laugh, Will smiled and shook his head as Hannibal leaned down across him to kiss at his neck. His hair was soft between Will’s fingers, the caress seeming to

encourage Hannibal to lean down further and press the length of their bodies tightly together. The laugh turned to a swift inhale.

One hand slipped lazily to his mouth, teeth denting the skin as he bit down. The other curled into the pillow by his side as Hannibal began gently stroking at the slit beneath his eager cock. Will groaned softly into the pillow and splayed his legs without conscious thought, eyes fluttering closed.

“Not exactly what I was going for,” he murmured against his hand, eyes half lidded.

“You cannot hold me to etiquette when I am provoked,” Hannibal rebutted, voice throaty with sleep and arousal, murmuring across Will’s chest as he traced the skin.

“I didn’t know a kiss good morning could be called *provoking*,” Will said wryly, left hand going to Hannibal’s nape to run gently over the hairs there; watching Hannibal shiver at the touch made him bite his bottom lip in anticipation.

“Five days is a long time to fast, darling.”

“You look awfully collected, for a starving man.”

“Perhaps I simply have a mask for every occasion.”

“Mmm, I noticed,” Will puffed out a breath as Hannibal subtly shifted from caressing to entering, “*ah* your hands are cold.”

“Apologies. Poor circulation. I am sure you will warm me up soon enough.”

Grinning, Will reached up to pull Hannibal close enough to kiss, arms around his shoulders and neck.

“What would you have of me, darling?” asked against his collarbone.

It was pointless to deny himself the need of it, even as it bit at him, “Do I have to pick a part? Or can I take everything?”

“Everything? How demanding. But I do so love a challenge.”

Always patient with him, always kind. Will couldn’t help but appreciate the gentle handling. Hannibal was never demanding. Sometimes it drove him a little mad, but he’d rather that than some other horror stories he’d heard. Of alphas taking what they wanted when they wanted, with no laws to restrict them. Another one of the many, many reasons he’d been adamantly single for so long.

His Hannibal; gentle and patient, yet passionate and intense beneath the shroud. Sometimes they complimented, *both quiet and fastidious by nature with an underlying wit and ability to see where others could not*, but the contrasts kept things interesting, *cultured to his rustic, urbane to his unrefined, social to his introverted*. Always something new to discover, the exploratory nature of their relationship allowing Will to not feel awkward about his lack of experience.

Trying new things with Hannibal was surprisingly easy, especially considering he didn't exactly have a frame of reference. Years of suppressants had been on the menu for a reason, and from his formative teenage years until the moment he was desperate enough to come off the Antryphodene over a year ago, that menu had not included sex. To be truthful he'd never even really thought about it much, considering he'd never found anyone worth looking at twice. *Now that he was romantically involved, Will liked to understand himself as having high standards; what others would probably call 'being very picky'.*

Then Hannibal had slipped into his life; *an end to looking but not seeing*. His arrival had signalled coming change, an end to his existence as he'd come to accept it, and the emergence of new choices. The night he had stopped taking the suppressants had been what he considered a last resort, to try and crack the case that couldn't be solved; the illusive Chesapeake Ripper. That's what he'd told himself. Only on visiting Lecter's house that night things had strayed from a need to know to simple, ineluctable understanding; *an end to an era and an end to his obsession.*

Then the start of a new one. The rather wild minded and livid night at Lecter's home during the height of the Olmstead murder had been something he was sure neither had been expecting at the time. *Hannibal had been so gentle with him, Will could only remember the rapture of hands and mouth and his skin singing until his mind shut down*. Only now, as he peeled back the layers of skin one by one, did he think he knew his mate well enough to understand that Hannibal had most certainly been expecting it.

Hannibal was always expectant of the outcome to his machinations.

Because Hannibal wasn't like anyone he'd ever met, and was sure he would not again. Soft and demure, yet hard and unyielding when his principles were brought to task. Fiercely intelligent, smugly arrogant, beautifully skilled in whatever he put his hands to, with a mind for somewhat childish humour and wicked words, even as he continually hid his true self within in the shadows.

Despite the deep connection holding them flush, he knew there was always a piece missing, buried where no one but Hannibal could find it.

Will didn't mind, there was time to unravel the finer points. In fact he found himself wishing to take his time, long and slow. *Untangling the carefully crafted web of masks was a wonderful puzzle.* He was willing to be in the shadows too if that's what it took. *He knew parts of himself already resided there, waiting for Hannibal to uncover them.*

As they moved together on the bed Will closed his eyes and accepted the kiss. *As close as they came to showing themselves utterly and completely, all costume and intrigue dropped to the floor like discarded clothing.* Will left himself open, inviting. Hannibal slid inside, eyes intent on his, and Will craned his head back and cursed with a smile.

"Too much?" he was asked.

"Not enough," was his reply.

They made love in the afternoon sunshine. Whispered words caused *faster, harder*, while gentle touches evoked *slow, smooth,* and Will enjoyed the bizarrely symbiotic hold they had over each other; *shared dominance*. Will held the reigns, while Hannibal allowed himself to be leashed by them. And of course occasionally yank them from Will's grip to test their budding limits.

When he eventually opened his eyes Will was sweaty, sated and veritably glowing. Above him Hannibal was watching him closely, as always, before leaning in to kiss at his forehead. Once, twice, on the third he stopped to push his nose into Will's damp curls and breathe in. Will reached up to run his hands down tempting sides, smiling as Hannibal jerked involuntarily at the feeling.

"Glad you did not hurry us to breakfast now?" Hannibal asked.

"Perhaps."

"I must admit I do not feel truly flattered by your brevity."

Will laughed, "Need me to declare that you just fucked me senseless? That's a little insecure of you."

"Not at all. I simply like to hear you, as they say, talk dirty."

Beneath him, Will stretched like a cat, long and leisurely, "That's not it. You just like compliments."

"Perhaps," Hannibal said, mimicking.

"Well you're just going to have to wait for your flatteries. I have better things to do today than lie here and enthuse about what a fantastic lay you are."

"Perish the thought," Hannibal said, eyes dancing with mischief, "what, pray tell, are your plans?"

"I need to buy a pig."

"A pig."

"A whole pig."

"Why settle with half?" the right side of Hannibal's mouth ticked up in a smile.

"I'm hoping the butchers will accommodate me," Will covered a yawn.

"I am sure they will," Hannibal said, running his hand down the length of Will's abdomen, smearing the thick fluid of their shared release across his hot skin, "This is either a very ambitious meal plan, or something to do with your upcoming study, I assume."

"Unfortunately I don't think it'll be edible after I'm done with it," Will said, licking his lips and sniffing, craning his neck back to read the wall clock: *five to one*, "I was thinking I

should get there before noon, but so much for that."

"I'll come with you. It has been some time since I shopped for a good cut of beef. I have been craving filet mignon ever since I landed in Chicago. Good for you?"

"Sounds delicious," Will replied, nuzzling Hannibal's shoulder.

"But first, a shower?"

"A shower," Will agreed, adding in a wry tone, "and I want to be clean when I come out of it."

The look on Hannibal's face made no promises.

The moment of eureka bloomed into being at one forty five pm a week later with a thermometer, a blanket and the third pig the butchers had been happy, if not bemused, to supply. At seven hundred dollars a shot (six hundred seventy five for the pig alone, and a rather hilarious twenty five for shipping) Will was running short of patience for wasting funds. So far Hannibal had been shelling out, always with a stern promise from Will of 'you'll get it back when the grant comes through'.

He knew Hannibal did not care for the money, but still, Will stuck by his principles. It had never been part of his plan to be a kept pet.

And now, the third pig had unfolded the secret.

"You fucking genius," Will muttered to himself as he recorded the time and temperature with a scratchy pen, watching the digital readout flicker down another degree, "wrapped her up, didn't you, wrapped her up to keep her hidden, and look where it got us."

Walking backwards earned him a trip over a box by the door, swiftly recovered against the wall as Will bundled himself out of his lab - or large shed, which was closer to its reality - at the bottom of the garden. He quick-walked, eyes still glued to his notes. The garden was a familiar enough space that he didn't have to look; moving around the twin pampas grass, flowering their long alien-like stamens, the flowering bushes and the pear tree by the neighbour's fence and towards the decking at the back door. Glancing up he saw the door was open, which could only mean Hannibal was in the kitchen.

"I've got it," Will began calling out, looking back to the readings in his hands with excitement, "he was clever, *too* clever to slip in with the rest of his behaviour. She was wrapped in a duvet, or a rug, something tight. Slowed her body temp decrease and, here's the kicker, made it more difficult for the insects to get in and plant their eggs. That's why the dermestids weren't weathered and don't match up with the rate of decay, and the larval skins..."

Looking up again had his mouth run dry, lips still parted as he stared up at the shape of a person he hadn't expected. Alana Bloom stood, arms folded to cradle her elbows, a small smile on her painted lips.

"Alana," he said redundantly.

"Late lunch at two? I said I'd be early? No?" she smiled, "Forgot, didn't you."

"I was...working," he said, putting his pen behind his ear and climbing onto the deck, "you look nice."

And she did, in her dark blue dress and high brown boots, hair loose. Always easy on the eyes, Alana, even if her eyes weren't always easy on him. There was a subtle expectation there, as well as judgement, he knew that.

It suddenly seemed a long time since he'd seen her last. For a moment he allowed himself to realise how wrapped up he'd become in his bubble of a world, *safe and secure*, without even having to consider anything else. A quick calculation spat out: *three months and two weeks – a chance meeting at the Hippodrome during the intermission of Othello*. Will allowed a little guilt to slip in.

Still, Alana didn't bring it up, nor did she even seem to begrudge him the lack of acknowledgment. Instead she knew him well enough to simply say,

"Very smooth, Graham. So," she put out her hand and, after a pause, Will handed over the clipboard; Alana looked at it casually, "this is why you're getting complaints from the neighbours about the smell."

"He told you about that, did he?" Will said, unimpressed as Hannibal emerged with a tray of drinks to place on the wooden table by the door; Will took his when handed the glass, giving Hannibal a balanced stare, "You know you could have reminded me we were expecting guests."

"You were working," Hannibal said as if it were obvious, "besides, lunch is not yet ready," he turned to Alana and gestured to the shed, "luckily today the wind is South Westerly, so we can sit outside without fear of having our stomach's turned."

"It's not that bad," Will said wryly, sitting down stiff limbed and awkward; *other people always left him slightly wary these days*, "anyway, won't need her for much longer. Just a couple more hours, then you can stop fearing for your reputation in the community."

"I don't think Hannibal's ever worried about that," Alana said, raising an eyebrow with her smile as she too sat.

"We're all a little weird," Hannibal said, tipping his head a little to the left, "those who cannot understand that are not worth my effort to mollify," from the kitchen a timer sounded with a soft bell, "excuse me for a moment."

Will watched him go from under his lowered brow, picking at his nails with his other hand. The dirt there made him feel a little out of place; he'd walked from one world at the bottom of the garden, to another at the top. The sound of curling paper caught his ear and he cast a glace over Alana, still ruffling through his notes with one hand, drinking with the other.

"It's the Rulla murder," Will explained without prompting, "based on, I mean, not actually *the* murder, that would be..." he cleared his throat and sniffed, "it was five months ago?" Alana nodded but didn't say anything, "Well, that's what it is."

"You've been through three pigs?" Alana said, smiling a little as she caught his eye.

"This is the third."

"Third time lucky?"

"It wasn't luck. It was inspiration."

"You were inspired to wrap a pig in a rug. Do I even want to ask?"

"You think it'll put you off lunch?" Will joked dryly.

"Do *you* think it'll put me off my lunch?" Alana replied.

"It's nothing like that," Will shrugged as a leaf floated down onto the table from next door's oak; he picked it up and twirled it by the stem, "just the new, uh, blanket I got. Weighted, you know? Like you hear about in the dynamics booklets when they do canvassing door to door."

"Oh, I know," Alana said, waving it away, "heard enough to put me to sleep from my mom about them."

"They work," Will shrugged, "well, I mean while Hannibal's away, it's just..." clearing his throat again did nothing to loosen the tension he was slipping into; *the need to justify himself grew like a tight knot in his gut,* "...easier. Coming off suppressants seems to have made me a bit, uh, twitchy about...things."

After a short pause Will raised his gaze from the leaf to Alana, finding her watching him closely as she sipped her white wine spritzer, "You're coming off the suppressants?"

"Yes," Will said succinctly; *the judgement was there, he knew*, "we're trying for, I mean we've been trying for a baby."

He was glad she hadn't been drinking at the time, because Alana looked a little startled at the news and Will didn't feel like explaining to Hannibal why their guest was soaked in sparkling alcohol. She licked her lips and put the drink down on the wooden table gently. The sky shone like kyanite, deep and rich blue with a crystalline sheen near the effervescent sun. A day like any other, a day for a breakthroughs, a day for lunch on the patio, a day for status quo.

And now a day for revelations. The next words out of Alana's mouth made him rue the latter addition to the list.

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” she asked without compunction.

“Wow,” Will shook his head and smiled hollowly, “moving right past patting me on the back and straight to pushing me into the lion pit, huh?”

“I didn’t mean it like that,” she said genuinely, looking a little wary, “it’s just...I’m your friend and I don’t want to see you hurt. There, ok? It’s not that I don’t want you to, only...”

“Only you think I’m not stable enough,” Will finished for her.

“Don’t make me out to be the bad guy here. I thought we’d already talked about this.”

“Over a year ago,” Will pointed out, “things are different now.”

“No, they’re not,” Alana said, glancing to the kitchen as she lowered her voice, “Will, just because you’re mated doesn’t decrease the chances of complications after birth. You know that, the doctor you went to knows that,” she paused when Will took a deep breath, eyes skipping between her and the kitchen door, “...does Hannibal know that?”

“That’s not important. I want this, alright? We both want this.”

“Will...” she sounded as serious as he wished she didn’t.

“Can we talk about this another time?” he hurried out.

“You haven’t told him?”

“It’s not written in stone, Alana, don’t pigeon hole me just because of my fucking status.”

“I’m not, it’s just fact, don’t take this personally,” she said, even as Will felt like telling her how redundant it was, “Sixty seven percent of male omegas with previous mental disorders have severe neurological backlash after giving birth, especially traumatic deliveries.”

“It won’t be a fucking trauma.”

“Birth is a trauma, Will.”

“And echopraxia isn’t a serious mental disorder,” he continued as if she hadn’t spoken, even as he knew his argument was built on sand and Alana’s on stone.

“Yes, it is. It really is. You’ve never seen it, Will, but I have. God, Will, please just...” she stopped as the sound of plates clattered from the kitchen, “promise me you’ll tell him. It’s not fair to pretend it doesn’t exist. It’s just not fair.”

Lunch became a stilted affair. After three bites of his exquisite goat’s cheese, stripped beef and balsamic vinegar tart Will excused himself and walked strictly back down the garden to his lab.

It was difficult to keep an appetite with a stomach full of anger and guilt.

Nightly routines were grounding. Hannibal brushed his teeth over the sink, Will walked around with the brush in his mouth, doing little things. Hannibal followed a strict repertoire of cleanliness and skincare, Will washed his face with warm water and patted it dry. By the time Will got to the bed, it had always been turned down on his side.

Tonight Hannibal sat up against the headboard, tablet on his duvet covered legs. The lamp set the bedroom in a low, soporific glow. Slipping into his white night shirt, Will sat down on the bed, his back to Hannibal.

A pause wide enough to be a noticeable gap in the routine's usual uninterrupted flow. When it had stretched to its limit, Hannibal broke it with a neutral topic, enough to make Will feel the need to laugh. He simply wasn't sure yet if it would be with joy or despair.

"Face and voice signals," he began, "despite the different nature of their physical structure, carry highly similar types of socially relevant information. Both contain linguistic information, but also relevant information on a range of personal biological characteristics, gender, age, size, etc. From this angle the voice can be consider an auditory face, so to speak."

The sound of moving fabric, then of the tablet placed aside on the table. Will took a deep breath and let it out as he slipped into the bed, pulling the covers over, staying beneath. Heavy with a guilt that was all his own; not for keeping the truth from Hannibal, because he knew Hannibal did not need to be told. The guilt sprang from his need, something he did not always push for, overriding all others. Even logic.

"Interesting reading?"

"A journal article, not my usual fare; psychology. Swapping medicine of the body for that of the mind."

"Something someone recommended from the conference?"

"No, just a personal interest."

As he lay back, head against the pillow, Will took both hands and rubbed them forcefully over his face, "I told you, when we first met. You won't like me when I'm psychoanalysed. I thought you'd taken it in fair warning."

"I do not wish to creep into somewhere I am not wanted. I merely want you to talk to me."

"About what?"

"About whatever it was Alana said to you earlier, to make you so reluctant."

At times Will did not feel psychoanalysed by his husband, as much as he felt dissected; a corpse under the coroner's knife. The event would be dead and gone, now disinterred under watchful eyes. Not that he wished it buried, as such, he knew that it was in both their minds. Only...

“Not so much what Alana said to me,” Will admitted slowly, “as what I haven’t said to you.”

“You are worried.”

“Mmm.”

“Is this about the fertility treatments?”

“It’s about...about what’s going to come after that. You know what might happen. I know you do. You’re too officious not to have read up on the dangers.”

“Of course,” Hannibal said bluntly, forcing Will’s eyes to him; he sat, in his navy blue night clothes, and looked down at him without judgement, “and in return I know that you must know them.”

“Then maybe we’re both culpable.”

“We cannot be culpable for something that has yet to happen.”

“What if I..?”

...lose my mind.

He couldn’t voice it, because the subject was too close to ruining him. Always had been. It haunted his steps, from his childhood to his working life, *with Jack Crawford making allowances or his colleagues whispering behind their hands*. His dad had hated explaining away his son’s behaviour, having to disclose his disorder on dynamics assessments, or to families of potential suitors. *The little odd duck*. At times like those he’d missed the idea of a mother the most; he’d never known her, so she could be nothing more than an idea to him. A balance, that’s what he’d imagined, a balance to his father’s stern, traditional views. Someone to show him where he came from because, for the life of him, he couldn’t see a single trace of himself in his father’s face, or his gestures, his habits.

Someone to show him that he was normal, simply because he would no longer be the only one.

“Then I will be right here,” Hannibal answered; *his auditory face saying what his own did not*.

And then sometimes, when he was feeling reckless, Will knew Hannibal filled the hole that rolled about his life creating *noticeable gaps* or *long silences*. That sometimes he let Hannibal be his balance, because there was no one better suited to understanding what that meant. Rolling onto his side, he was met half way with an arm around his shoulders and a kiss to his lips.

“Good,” Will said, keeping his emotions tight even as they strained his voice, “because if you went anywhere else I’d be hunting you down.”

“Sounds tempting,” Hannibal admitted, thumb stroking rhythmically against Will’s upper arm.

“Careful,” Will said, smiling as he curled against Hannibal’s side, arm across his waist, “your inner predator is showing.”

“I am sure I could give you a far more impressive demonstration.”

“I’m sure you could,” Will said as the hands on his body slid beneath the cloth, “and if you try hard enough? You might even see mine.”

“Such a delight, my darling,” Hannibal muttered as he pulled Will atop him, “You are such a delight.”

Perched atop his mate, looking down into twinkling eyes and a subtle smile, Will found his balance.

Coincidental/Intended

Chapter Notes

> First of all, a very Merry Christmas, Holidays and Happy New Year to you all! I hope you had wonderful times with lots of happiness and chocolate (the chocolate is obligatory). Here's to 2016 being far better than 2015, full of inspiration and joy (and maybe a new series of Hannibal if some lovely network picks it up..? You never know your luck!)

“I don’t have to be there.”

“No,” Hannibal agreed as he emptied the leftovers into the stainless steel bin in the corner, “but that does not mean I would not prefer it if you were.”

Right in the middle of a difficult time, a pair of invitations had arrived. Not difficult because either he or Hannibal were being particularly difficult themselves, but instead because life had decided it could step up to the plate if no one else was going to supply friction.

The first had been Jack Crawford, stirring the pot. Will had always liked the metaphor. He thought it was particularly apt for Jack. Crawford may put on the bravado, but beneath he was cunning enough to know the ingredients he needed to make his recipes work. Jack’s ingredient list was a good team, and Will knew he was nestled in there somewhere. It had been difficult enough leaving the BAU, but to have the BAU actively hunting you was somehow worse.

Will knew that all Jack would positively react to was blatant, blunt refusal. So when Jack had cornered him into a meeting and spent the whole time dancing around the issue, Will hadn’t felt an iota of guilt when he’d said, “Jack, would you mind fucking off with this subtle bullshit? It’s like sitting in the long grass with a snake” to Crawford’s face. It had been a plus to his intuition when Jack had just laughed, his sharp eyes watching Will closely. His adamant rebuttal had left a bad note in the air, and not just with Jack. Truthfully, Will knew that Hannibal had always hidden his disappointment at Will leaving his bolt hole at the FBI. Not that he would ever say so.

He was too polite for something as vulgar as saying it out loud.

And then the second invitation had arrived, and bizarrely it was somehow worse than the first. Will just wished he’d woken earlier that day. Normally he always woke up earlier than Hannibal, but that morning the lure of a few extra hours with his eyes closed had been too much. *Too much worrying, too much focusing on work to ignore worrying, too little sleep.* When he woke and went down for breakfast he had found Hannibal leaning against the range with a cup of hot tea in one hand and a letter in the other which he read in silence. Secreted

within ivory stationary, and written with fine ink, had come a summons to the Lecter mansion.

'*A charity ball,*' his husband had said in reply to inquiring what had come through the letterbox, '*it seems my aunt has found a new cause to champion. The twenty third of May. We do not have plans for the twenty third, do we darling?*'

A question asked while the answer was well and truly known. Will wished Hannibal wouldn't try to be coy. Even more than that Will wished he'd woken earlier. If he'd been the first to find the letter he could have thrown it in the fire with no remorse and pretended it had never arrived. Now he was partaking in another of those talks that always left a bad taste in his mouth. For a man with no family, something in Will always grated whenever he tried his best to keep them both away from Hannibal's relations. Sometimes it smacked of a bitter jealousy he wasn't willing to explore.

"Having to and wishing and wanting," Will shook his head as he placed the rinsed plates into the dishwasher in a neat row, "I guess that doesn't matter, really."

"Meaning?" Hannibal asked.

"Meaning I should stop trying to wrap it in pretty words and courtesy when it comes to your goddamn aunt. I'm not going because I don't want to go. Ok?"

"I would not force you, of course."

"No, but I'll know what you're thinking," Will sighed.

"Know what?"

"Don't bother pretending," Will said dryly, "I'll *know*. And then I'll have to put up with it for weeks; knowing," Will stood, straightening out his back, and sighed as he rubbed at his face; Hannibal was still watching him, as an ambush predator waits for the prey's weakness to show, "look, we're all well aware that this is a bad idea and I am absolutely not going to enjoy it. I can't. Even if it was fun I wouldn't allow myself to enjoy it."

This made Hannibal smile softly as he rinsed the casserole dish in the sink and handed it over. Will took it and shook his head.

"Always the devil's advocate," Hannibal said.

"Nope, just my own. Anyway...look," a tipping point, which he felt as if he tripped over rather than stepped, "I'll go, alright? I'll go, just don't expect it to end in anything but tears."

"I doubt I could imagine either of you weeping over mutual insults."

"It's a metaphor."

"All metaphors have a basis in fact. But I am glad you will accompany me, it would have been rather awkward alone. Some of my relatives do not believe I have truly settled down. I am hoping to convince them...Will?"

Hannibal stood, still with a small, attractive smile on his lips and a dish in his hands, watching as Will laughed into his cupped right hand. A genuine, full bodied laugh, eyes squinted in pleasure. When he finally managed to stop, rolling his shoulders and grinning, Hannibal raised a brow.

"*Settled down*," Will said as if it were the single most absurd thing he'd ever heard, voice still hitching with laughter, "tell me another one."

Lying in bed later that night, he found it hard to relax. He would go, yes he would go, but he knew it was a terrible idea. It would sit on the horizon of the twenty third like a looming vulture, beady eyes ready to feast on the vitriol of shared dislike. Rolling onto his side and fluffing his pillow Will took a deep breath and held it.

Understanding was a rare consolation. Growing up misunderstood, Will had always found it easier to *understand*. Other people couldn't deny their true natures; it had always been a useful weapon for keeping the unwanted at bay.

Understanding: a simpler avenue with prey than loved ones, and the reason Jack hunted him relentlessly. Unfortunately for Will, Lady Murasaki was most certainly on that side of the line, planted firmly in with those he understood with the most clarity. Cold blood ran between them, slicking the way for mutual animosity and heightened awareness of motivation, as it always did with everyone he met.

Besides Hannibal that was, but he was willing to make one exception to his rule.

The hotel was nice, it was, truly fitting with Hannibal's ostentatious tastes from the marble columns in the lobby to the gilt door handles in the suite; even if all it did was underline Will's stubborn, abrasive feelings. Every step inside the building, every coat hanger used in the sliding door wardrobe, every drink ordered from room service until he gave in and asked for the bottle.

It was nice here, but it was everything that was wrong with their keeping in touch with Hannibal's aunt and uncle. Will lay back on the pristine sheets and stared at the ceiling, lazily swirling the amber of forgetfulness in its heavy tumbler gripped tightly.

"No place to think about the space in between us, is there?" he asked no one in particular; he rolled his head to the side and took an awkward sip, spilling a little on the bedspread, forcing him to sit up and murmur, "Shit," as he dabbed at the stain with a heavy napkin from the nightstand.

Hannibal had gone on ahead to help prepare for the do. Will had decided that it would be better if he stayed out of the way of preparations, partly for Hannibal's benefit and partly for his own. There was no enjoyment in mixing business with pleasure, and Hannibal's aunt Murasaki was all business where he was concerned. Not the sort of business he was interested in.

Not his interest. That's where the need to fill his glass had come from. *Would you stop him if he left?* The old question sprang up at the first sign of weakness, and Will allowed the alcohol to ignore the implications on his behalf.

Dinner alone felt nostalgic. A look back at how things had been before expensive hotel rooms and lavish dinners and trips to Europe on a whim. Will ate in the room with a rented movie on the overly large television: *Some Like it Hot*. It was difficult not to laugh, even if he didn't feel in the mood to be happy. Or sad. Or anything, really. The false happiness forced on him by humour helped keep everything else at bay; that strange, empty, lost pit in his stomach that he hated for what it was.

His life like it had been before.

Him in his cabin out in Wolf Trap, tying intricate knots into fishing flies and fixing boat motors and walking with the stray dogs that followed him out of camaraderie and the hope for food scraps and trying his best to pretend he didn't care that he was going to be alone for the rest of his life because he couldn't even begin to understand how to start changing for someone else without ending up resenting himself, or them, or both.

Hannibal, on the other hand...

The room felt empty again and Will sighed. He took a hasty mouthful of rice and pork stroganoff, smiling emptily as Jack Lemmon tore off his wig and declared himself a man.

Well, nobody's perfect, came the reply.

Will chewed over his food and swallowed, along with his thoughts. Then he frowned as the words repeated in his head, eyes squinting slightly, then he smiled, then he grinned and let out a hissing laugh. *What the hell am I trying to do to myself?* he thought. Another mouthful of bourbon had him shaking his head and settling down to choose something else to pass the time on the screen.

Worrying about his life choices could wait until he was forced to believe they needed thorough revising.

Hannibal had sent a car to pick him up, because of course Hannibal had sent a car. *Couldn't have his partner turning up in a 2004 Volvo flatbed truck with visible rust around the real wheel arches, could he?* Will thought. Too down home American. What would fit in worse between the Rolls Royces and the Mazeratis? Maybe the old Jeep he'd had before he met Hannibal. Thing guzzled gas and was solid as a rock, even if it would have been the ugly duckling at the party.

Right now, he empathised with the sentiment. Stepping out of the sleek Mercedes made him feel as uncomfortable as the suit he wore; well fitting, tailored and enough to make him itch. He walked with a few other attendees making their way towards the well lit, scalloped stairway which led to the mouth of the mansion.

“Name?” he was asked as he reached the top step, making him blink a little and search for the source.

A suit and tie with a polite smile stared back at him, holding a guest list. Will had to suppress the urge to turn and leave on the spot.

“Will Graham,” he muttered out, scratching at his neck.

“I’m sorry sir,” the suit said in a voice that sounded nothing like it, “but you appear not to be on my list.”

“Christ,” Will shook his head and made to walk inside; when a hand moved up to stop him he jerked back like a horse from an electric fence. Beside them an older couple walked past, eyeing the scene with a mix of upturned noses and inner circle gossip mongering.

“I am unable to permit you without an invitation, sir.”

Hands in his pockets, Will smiled grimly, “You’re making it sound like you wouldn’t be doing me a favour.”

The doorman frowned and made to speak, only to be interrupted.

“I know you.”

Both Will and the suit turned as one to the bright doorway, to find a young girl there dressed in an eye bleeding combination of a turquoise blue satin dress fringed with orange frill, complete with red tights and shoes. In her hands she held a doll, similarly bedecked and with matching blonde hair.

“Excuse me, miss, but this...” the suit began.

“You’re Will Graham,” she said purposefully, “you’re uncle’s friend.”

“Doctor Lecter?” the suit said, as if to himself, swallowing.

“Friend?” Will asked with a small smile and a raised brow.

“Come on,” she said, grabbing his hand without preamble and pulled him inside.

The suit had no protest to offer.

Through the looking glass, he thought as he passed towered champagne glasses trickling with fizz, ladies bedecked in anachronistic hats standing by men in striped suits and animal faced masks. As they walked by, the main ballroom revealed a woman suspended from the ceiling by golden silken strands, twisting and tumbling in an artful display of obscene wealth. By the stairs there stood a towering stuffed bear on its hind legs, a shotgun placed between its raised paws.

Will wondered if it was worth drinking, or whether the decor alone would suffice.

Thankfully the girl continued to lead him through the absurdity, through the main atrium and around a corner into a long corridor, quieter, removed. The arched ceiling made it seem taller than it truly was, and Will couldn't remember ever having been down it on his few visits to the estate. It was lined with plinths sporting morose looking busts. When the girl released his hand she trotted over to a particularly gruff looking example, its long beard touching its wooden stand, and sat down on a low bench against the wall.

Will looked around himself in a slow turn, eyes flitting over the cathedral ceiling and the gold plated light fittings.

"I suppose it would be too much to hope that your name is Alice," he asked without thinking.

"Veronica," she corrected without hesitation

When Will looked at her she stared back unabashedly; which was the moment he realised he didn't mind meeting her eye. He pulled his hands out of his pockets and walked over to her, sitting down at the other end of the bench.

"Let me guess," he said, exhaling, "after a grandmother?"

"On my mother's side," she nodded with a slightly sour look, watching him, "he's not really my uncle, you know."

"I figured not."

"I just call him that because he said I could."

"He can be quirky like that," Will said, itching to ask more; he didn't want to push, so instead said, "so how'd you know my name?"

"You work for the FBI, don't you?"

Through the thick layer of antisocial brusqueness and standoffishness Will always wore to a gathering such as this, he looked at the young girl and smiled. She was charmingly blunt and brusquely truthful. He could see why Hannibal would be taken with her.

"Used to," he nodded, "how'd you know that?"

"I read about you. The Minnesota Shrike, right? And The Angel maker. It's five. Five major cases and five convictions."

"That's right," Will didn't want to seem too taken aback; he guessed she got enough of that already, probably from her parents, "you interested in criminal psychology?"

"Mm hmm. My mom doesn't like it, but I like knowing about people. Some people are stranger than most."

"So I've found," Will said, cocking his head, "what with being a little strange myself. But then I've always thought that the strange ones tend to be the most interesting."

Suddenly, from her mainly impassive face, Veronica smiled brightly. Her eyes seemed to grow larger, showing off their watery blue. It was slightly disconcerting, but Will just smiled in return. Without warning, she handed Will the doll she'd been clutching. Taking it felt like entering into some sort of unknown bargain. *Maybe we're all just strangers, flocking together*, he thought as he looked down at the doll, noticing it had only one eye.

"Need a new eye for..?" he left it open.

"Hannah. Her name's Hannah."

"Hannah, right. Here," he said, looking down at his uncomfortable, slightly detested, bespoke suit, "have one of mine."

The button came away in a few swift tugs and twists. He handed it back to Veronica with the doll, pressed together as if to make the two as one. Little Veronica took them with her bottom lip between her teeth.

"Won't you get in trouble?" she asked.

"Oh this?" Will pointed to the ruined slips of string hanging from his suit, "It's fine. I'll fix it. I'm good with needles."

"Me too," she said enthusiastically, smoothing the orange ruffles on her dress, "but mom always gets me in trouble when I sew on my new dresses."

"I like it," Will said, looking over her garish garment, "not exactly my colour scheme, but I like it. So, uncle huh? How'd that start?"

"Uncle Hannibal looked after me when I got the measles last year."

"Measles?" Will frowned in concern, "Haven't you had the inoculations?" she squinted her eyes and frowned, "Your jabs at school."

"Uh uh. Mom said they're poison. But I'd say measles was poison too. Although I've never been poisoned, so I guess I wouldn't know. Still, it was really strange. I had weird dreams. I don't really remember it much. Have you ever been ill?"

"Once. I had a fever when I was nine. Had weird dreams then too."

They fell into an awkward silence. Will bit down on the anger he was holding back towards Veronica's parents. In the background a lively tune perked up, the violins ringing out loudly. Standing up, Will offered her his arm.

"Fancy some champagne?" he asked.

"I'm only twelve," she said, as if he were mad.

"In France you get it at ten," Will shrugged.

"Oh, ok," she agreed, as if that made perfect sense.

He walked her back to reality, and it felt insincere somehow to return to it. They weren't supposed to be there, Will felt, as if they were intruding. Or perhaps that reality was intruding upon them. He snagged a tall flute of champagne from a passing waiter and emptied half of it out into a tall plant pot sporting a fern.

"Only half, don't want you getting too hyper."

"Thank you," she said, watching the bubbles in her glass as they wandered slowly around the atrium, "but you said you don't work for the FBI anymore?"

"Nope. I write now. Maybe not anything you'd have read," Will shrugged, thinking about how sharp the girl was, "but I might be wrong. I write about cases."

"But if you don't work there, how do you write about it?"

"You don't have to work there to get information," Will said, looking at a long buffet table as they walked through the archway into the ballroom, the music intensifying and the crows thickening; every step was taffeta and silk, mixed with absurdity, "it's who you know, kid."

"Oh. Like Hollywood."

"Yeah," Will couldn't help but let out a small laugh at the analogy, "only with more backstabbing."

"This stuff is weird," Veronica said, lifting up her glass and wrinkling her nose.

"Most alcohol is," Will agreed, taking it from her, "adults like to pretend it's nice."

"Why?"

"Grown-ups like to lie," Will said as he scanned the crowd, feeling a familiar itch at his neck, "it makes them feel powerful."

"Mmm," Veronica narrowed her eyes again, as if in understanding, "my mum lies."

"She does?"

"I think she might do it to try and not hurt my feelings. She says she likes things, but then she won't take them. I made her this," Veronica put her thumb under a necklace she wore, shining with what seemed to be alternating pieces of hematite and coral, "but she wouldn't wear it."

"I wouldn't worry about it, sweetheart," Will said, "suits you better anyway."

"Thanks," once more grinning her disconcerting grin; when the crowd parted before them, Will looked up and found a familiar sight revealed. Veronica tugged at his arm, "Look! There's uncle!"

It had always been something he'd found easy to dislike about Hannibal when they'd first met, that he was always dressed as an aristocrat, but even then he couldn't deny the fact that the man looked incredibly fine in any suit he chose to wear. The particular choice for the

evening was a dark plum with black velvet lapels, tailored tightly into the small of his back and trimly across his broad shoulders. Will let Veronica go as she trotted up to the group, which Will noted included the ever present Lady Murasaki, dressed in a stunning red ball gown, black satin, elbow length gloves and a polite yet vicious smile. The rest of the guests at the huddle were unknowns, a man and two women who seemed far more fitting to the situation than Will felt.

When Hannibal turned and smiled at Veronica as she patted his arm, Will felt embarrassed at how glad he was to see him. *One night apart*, Will thought, berating himself, *and it's enough to make me lonesome. Fucking hell.*

"Veronica, my dear, how wonderful to see you," Hannibal said, looking up as Will approached, "and I see you have brought me an errant gift."

"Will fixed her for me," she said with a smile, showing him the doll and the button.

"So I see," Hannibal said.

"My gift wrap might be a little damaged," Will shrugged, picking at the abused threads.

"Veronica, don't harass Doctor Lecter," the unknown man said as he guided the girl to his side; he was short and saggy cheeked with a pale complexion and matching blonde hair. Her father, Will was sure. The woman at his side, kitted out in a sharp black bob of hair and exaggerated make-up above a corseted green dress must have been the mother, Will thought with distaste. Her and Veronica shared the same watery blue eyes, but it appeared that it was the only thing they did.

Leaning in, Hannibal kissed at his neck in a practiced display of affection, an appropriate greeting for their situation and their company.

"I had thought you may have changed your mind," Hannibal took the opportunity to murmur by his ear.

"I was just down the rabbit hole," Will shrugged, enjoying Hannibal's intrigued glance.

"Oh, but Hannibal!" the mother suddenly spoke up, in a sultry voice Will hadn't been expecting, "This must be him! So you weren't pulling the wool over our eyes, Murasaki, it's true. Dear Doctor Lecter has been completely and utterly caught."

Lady Murasaki's polite smile did not waver, but her eyes said otherwise. At the other end of the room, by an ice sculpture of a stag with its antler's raised, the string quartet began playing *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*. The other woman at their group, dressed in a strapless black and white evening gown and with truly artful coil of golden blonde hair, hid her own reaction behind a sip of red wine before speaking.

"Caught implies there was a chase," her tone was attractively husky and demure, "can I assume you were the predator Hannibal?"

“Ineluctably,” Hannibal said, cocking his head forwards towards the blonde and lowering his voice, “although now I believe it may be the reverse.”

“Forgive me,” Lady Murasaki spoke up, putting her hand to her chest, “what a terrible host I am. Bedelia, my dear, this is Will Graham. And I must introduce Fiona Charnham and her wonderful husband Charles. Fiona has been treasurer on the chair of the project, truly indispensible.”

“You’re too kind,” Fiona said, touching Murasaki’s arm and smiling.

Will expected that this was some sort of opening for him to politely inquire as to what the fundraiser was for; he was sure that it was noticeable that he stayed utterly silent. Hannibal stayed beguilingly close, yet not touching. Will had to resist the urge to lean a little to the left and press their sides flush.

“Ah, but you must excuse me,” Murasaki said, looking off to the left and waving, “I simply must go and speak to Mr Evansham, he has donated a considerable sum. Do enjoy yourselves.”

Without the subtle glue of the hostess, the awkwardness returned, even if only for a moment. Veronica looked amused by the silence. Will smiled in return.

“So, I understand you work at the FBI, Mr. Graham?” Mr Charnham eventually asked with all the enthusiasm of tired bloodhound.

“Not really,” Will said, taking a drink of the last of the champagne in his glass; even if he detested the stuff, at least it took the edge off, “I’m back in teaching now.”

“Ah,” Charnham said, nodding sagely, “a good position for someone like yourself. Honestly, and don’t take anything from it, I’m amazed they put you in such a position in the first place. Dangerous work, catching murderers.”

“Quite,” Will said, gripping his glass tightly and keeping his eyes on the far wall.

“Someone at the Mayor’s office ought to look into who’s running that department,” Fiona Charnham chipped in her two cents.

“I know, mom,” Veronica said, looking up at her mother who staunchly ignored her, “I know who it is.”

“Someone who purposefully puts omegas in harm’s way is not someone I would trust to run a scrupulous investigation,” Charnham said brusquely.

So far, Will felt he could commend himself on his restraint. Instinctively he leaned away from Hannibal. He could feel the eyes of the blonde, Bedelia, watching him with interest.

“I think you’re really brave,” Veronica spoke up when her mother refused to respond to her, “I’d be scared if I had to shoot someone.”

“It’s not so much scary,” Will said, licking at his bottom lip and blinking, “as much as it is ugly. Killing is always ugly, even when it’s in self defence.”

Veronica looked contemplative as her father butted in.

“Hobbs wasn’t it?” Charnham spoke up, “The one you took care of? Jacob Hobbs. I remember the headlines. Maniac. Killed his wife and daughter. You did the world a service putting that dog down,” he said, raising his glass towards Will before taking a drink.

“Still, it takes a certain type to pull a trigger, doesn’t it?” Fiona said, smiling even as her eyes stayed hard.

“I’m sure they’re the kind of qualities the FBI look for,” Bedelia said, “but you must tell us what you’re working on, Will.”

“I’m sure it’s not a subject for polite conversation,” Will didn’t have the energy to stop the heavy sarcasm on the last two words.

“Certainly not with impressionable minds present,” Charnham said, putting his hand on his daughter’s shoulder.

“I don’t know,” Will said, frowning, “sounds like she already has her own interests.”

“Oh, you mustn’t pay attention to Veronica’s fancies,” Fiona said, with a dismissive laugh, “she’s quite the morbid one. I hope you weren’t encouraging her, Mr Graham.”

“Why not?” Will said, unable to hide the harshness in his tone, “someone has to.”

Another polite but confused laugh from Fiona. Will felt Hannibal’s eyes on him, before they moved on. Will felt like closing his. *Why did I ever say yes to this?* he asked himself as he felt his restraint buckle under the pressure.

“I can’t imagine what you mean,” Fiona said.

“Just that anyone should have the right to pursue whatever they want in life,” Will stated, trying for neutrality.

“Awfully socialist of you, Graham,” Charnham said, sniffing, “what do you have to say for it, Doctor?”

Smiling demurely, Hannibal answered, “I find it always sensible to agree with my husband.”

“Like that eh?” Charnham said with a dismissive raise of his brows.

“More egalitarian than I knew you were capable of being, Hannibal,” Bedelia said, keeping her eyes averted as Hannibal looked to her.

“It’s sentiments like that which bring our whole society to the brink,” Fiona said, waving her hand when her husband tried to butt in, “and I’m not being dramatic, Charles. I’m not. It’s just that sometimes people think that...”

“That everyone is created equal?” Will finished for her.

Everyone had fallen suspiciously quiet as they continued to speak. The party swirled on about them, heedless of the building tension.

“If you want to put it bluntly,” she said, “then I suppose you must. It still doesn’t change things.”

“And if your daughter told you she wanted to take up my line of work?” Will asked tightly.

“I would refuse,” she said, looking at him as if he were mad, “you think I would let my daughter...”

“Follow her own dreams?” Will was vaguely aware that Veronica looked shocked, hugging her doll to her chest and looking at the adults as if seeing strangers.

“How dare you,” Fiona said, letting out a quick puff of breath, “what makes you think you have the right to question how I raise my little girl?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Will finished his champagne and stared at the emerald green strap of Fiona’s dress, face set hard, “the fact that you put her life in danger for the sake of a measles inoculation? The fact that you ignore her at every turn, and probably wouldn’t be able to answer any given simple question about her if I asked?”

“I don’t have to take this from you,” she said, colour appearing on her cheeks, “Charles? For god’s sakes, what’s the matter with you? Say something!”

Out the corner of his eye Will saw Hannibal smile. Normally it would have amused him, but now it felt more like claws against the back of his neck. Will felt a little giddy with the intuition of it all, and yet simultaneously cold with it.

“Look here, Graham...” Charnham began, looking out of his depth.

“I’ll bet you don’t even know how to start taking an interest in anyone but yourself, do you?” Will said as if to himself; when he looked up and met Fiona’s gaze he saw the woman flinch, “What’s the name of the doll?”

“*Excuse* me?” Fiona said, eyes narrowed.

“The doll, Mrs Charnham, it’s not difficult. Your daughter’s doll. What’s it’s name?”

“This is ridiculous...” she tried to laugh it off, even with a vicious edge.

“The name, please,” Will pushed.

“I don’t know the stupid thing’s name!” she spat, flaring up, “And you are the rudest person I’ve ever met! And how *you* can stand there and let your mate talk this way has seriously lowered you in my estimations Doctor Lecter,” Fiona said, giving Hannibal a glare.

“He’s not my keeper,” Will said tightly.

“Well maybe he should be!” she hissed, pulling her daughter with her as she turned to leave, before stopping and turning back as if deciding on something, “and it doesn’t surprise me at all that you’re having such trouble conceiving. It’s obvious that some people just aren’t fit to be parents!”

A slap in the face would have been easier to take. As the Charnhams, with a silent Veronica at their side, strutted off into the crowd Will thought about how he’d come to be here. Who for and why. What the point of it was.

Hannibal had insisted he accompany him. *To show me off, that it?* he wondered. Probably not, if this was something Hannibal knew would happen sooner or later. *Then why?* He had to ask himself.

He’d been on edge for months now. Ever since leaving the FBI his life had been one big unknown. Not that Will couldn’t deal with unknowns, just that now his unknowns were all overseen by someone else. Hannibal was always present, and Will had only just realised that he’d come to the point where he couldn’t bear the thought of it being otherwise. *Caught* was what Fiona Charnham had called it. Will wondered, as he turned to Hannibal and handed him his empty champagne glass, if that was exactly what Hannibal thought of him.

“Don’t bother,” Will said darkly when Hannibal made to follow him as he left, “I’m getting a cab.”

“Of course,” Hannibal said without protest.

“Well?”

As Hannibal stood and watched his husband disappear into the crowd, he placed the empty glass he’d been given onto a passing waiter’s plate. When he turned to Bedelia she was swirling her wine thoughtfully.

“He’s delightfully observant. And blunt. Yet also overly righteous, from the sounds of it. Truthfully? He doesn’t seem your type.”

“I think that might say more about how well you know me than how well you know Will.”

“I have only just met him,” she pointed out, “honestly? I’m just glad that you truly appear to love him.”

“Oh?” Hannibal asked, lips quirked.

“Hopefully it’ll stop your aunt trying to force you onto me. Although I don’t hold my breath.”

“We would make a wonderful couple, wouldn’t we,” Hannibal said; Bedelia was utterly spellbinding, and yet her own intentions would never have aligned with his own. She could

have been perfect, were she not so fearful of him, despite how she chose to portray herself. Will on the other hand, Hannibal knew, had far more potential.

And, as Bedelia had so bluntly put it, Hannibal loved Will Graham. She just didn't need to know exactly why that was.

"Hannibal, please stop flirting. It's indecent."

"Just stating fact. If you'll excuse me, Bedelia."

As he made to leave, he was held back by Bedelia's parting shot.

"I'd be careful, playing with this one Hannibal," she said, "something tells me he's more dangerous than he looks."

"What a coincidence," Hannibal smiled, looking at her over his shoulder, "he said the same of me, once."

"Then he's a smart man."

"Would I settle for anything less?"

"Just promise me you won't get burned by your obsession with him. The fire that burns twice as bright burns half as long. I hate to throw proverbs, but you sound like you need this one."

"We do not both yet burn," Hannibal said, half to Bedelia and half to himself, "he is the oxygen to my flame. When we both burn together...that will be the moment the world sees us as we truly are. Still," he cocked his head, "until then I think it more intriguing just to watch."

"Always the voyeur," Bedelia said, with a hint of guilt to her tone, "then I'll wish you luck."

The vindication in Bedelia's words warmed him from the inside out. *She was a good sport*, he thought, *always such a good sport.* Even when there was a corpse on the floor between them, and blood on her hands.

Hannibal left the party alone, much as he had arrived.

Livid wouldn't cover it. Will wasn't livid. Livid was for fiery ire, lashing out and maybe smashing a lamp or two. No, he wasn't there, not living in that high pitched anger. He thought it worse to be where he was.

Doubt; mired in it. *Doubt* caused by Fiona Charnham's words, even if he still held with his assessment of her as a vicious, self centred bitch. *Doubt* about his conviction to have a child even though he constantly worried that they might turn out just like him, have his problems and his worries and his troubles. *Doubt* about Hannibal's intentions and his wants.

Doubt. It made him cruel, and he knew it. Which was why, once Hannibal had arrived at the hotel suite fifteen minutes after he had, Will stayed quiet. They moved around the rooms without catching each other's eyes, or occupying the same space, or speaking. It felt oddly hollow.

After fifteen minutes of silence, as Will walked through the sitting area with its armchairs and sofa and low, glass coffee table, Hannibal finally spoke up, "You think me cold."

Will didn't reply until he'd returned from the bedroom, changed back into his jeans and sweatshirt. He kept his eyes on his task of putting his suit jacket back into its hanger.

"No," Will answered succinctly and shook his head.

"Then I misjudge why you are angry."

"It seems like you misjudge more than that," Will draped the jacket carelessly over the back of the nearby armchair and walked to the windows, looking down over the busy city. Yet he did not look down, as most would. Instead he looked up, to the full white face in the sky. Staring out seemed representative of his feelings, "I'm not angry."

I'm just caught.

He didn't hear Hannibal move, but his voice drew closer as he spoke.

"You play with your thoughts in the moonlight," Hannibal finally stood beside him, staring out as he did, "how do they look to you, darling?"

"Black," he said softly, "most things do these days. You know that's how blood looks? My dad used to take me deer hunting in North Carolina, early; well before the blue dark. I would get it on my hands sometimes, my clothes, carrying back the bucks and the does. It looks black under moonlight."

They stood together, as spots of rain began to spatter on the glass. Above them, the moon became obscured by cloud, leaving only the faint shadow of light behind.

"You know your aunt likes to talk about our intimate problems behind your back," Will said, "is family as complicated for you as it is for me?"

"I think family is always complex," Hannibal said.

"I feel sorry for her, Veronica."

"She is a charming, intelligent, individual child, stunted by her environment."

"She's a butterfly in the glue, trying to fly free. I'd say I'm not angry that someone like Fiona Charnham has no trouble having kids, but I'd be lying. I'd say it wasn't fair but...no, it's not fair. Why the hell shouldn't I say it?"

"Darling..." Hannibal started.

“I’m fine,” Will said quickly, even if it was a blatant lie.

“They say blood is thicker than water,” Hannibal stated, “and yet water stays clear in moonlight. Perhaps blood is more malleable in its consistency,” he looked down and Will felt observed as Hannibal’s eyes landed on him, “I hope you are not changing your mind.”

“What, because some stuck up socialite threw my deepest fears back in my face?” Will shrugged, “No. I just...think it’s something I try my best to avoid. And maybe I shouldn’t avoid it any longer.”

“What darling?”

“That I’m being selfish, having a kid. The margin for error is wide, and I never was a good shot. Still,” Will met Hannibal’s gaze, “I’m not doing it alone, am I.”

“I would hate for you to think I was simply standing by to observe,” Hannibal said purposefully.

“Of course not,” Will said wryly, “you know Hannibal, when it comes to your family I feel shared about, like bits of meat at a buffet table. Do you want to join them?”

“In devouring you? I would have thought that was a privilege I would have alone. Do not hold it against me if I do not wish to share you.”

“At least we have that in common,” Will said, shoving his hands in his pockets, “Bedelia, by the way, she seems nice.”

“Is that a conservative assessment?”

“Yes. She’s afraid of you, isn’t she.”

“Why would you say that?”

“Body language,” Will shrugged, “and the way she watched me. When I stood alone, when I put distance between us, it was as if she was seeing something bizarre.”

“Bedelia has always feared the social web. Being a part of the web means you are always in fear of the spider at its centre.”

Watching Hannibal in the gloom of the lamp, he seemed changed. Unfamiliar and yet also familiar; *familiar* in his warmth and affection, *unfamiliar* through the predatory anticipation in his eyes. Will breathed in deeply and tried not to think about the fact that he did not believe Hannibal’s explanation.

It would simply be more doubt.

“It’s true, isn’t it,” he said.

“What is?”

“That you’ll never let me truly know you.”

“I would rather not spoil the fun so early.”

“Sometimes I feel like it would be better if I never figured it out.”

“And then?”

“And then I can’t help myself,” Will shrugged, “It’s one of my worst failings. I always have to know. Hannibal?”

“Yes dearest?”

“I’d rather you didn’t ask me to attend any more parties.”

“Of course, I would not expect you to suffer it again. May I make it up to you?”

Will’s lips twitched.

“Bird in a cage,” he murmured.

Hannibal’s eyes narrowed minutely, but his lips quirked higher. When Will felt a hand at his arm, he looked down to find long fingers trailing his shoulder.

“I would not have you fear me too, darling.”

“Not afraid of you Hannibal. I’m afraid of being *caught*. I told you once that I didn't want to be trapped, and I was promised an open door policy. Tell me, is it what you want? To cage me?”

“Can we not share the cage?”

Will laughed and shook his head before swallowing.

“If I had to share a cage with anyone, I wouldn’t do it with anyone else but you.”

“Perhaps the most romantic sentiment I have ever been offered,” Hannibal smiled genuinely, “but then sentiments are only offered when one reflects in sorrow. Do you miss it Will? Your life before?”

“I still have my life,” Will said, “it’s just...different now. I can’t say I’m not happy, if that’s what you want to hear.”

“I do,” Hannibal said, touching his neck with his fingertips; Will’s eyes fluttered closed on instinct, before blinking back open.

“Then we’ll leave it here, where it should be left.”

“And what you wished to know about me?”

“Left too.”

“You will not ask?”

“I’ll never ask,” Will smiled darkly, “because that would spoil the fun.”

Hannibal leaned in to kiss him suddenly, pulling their body’s flush and gripping him with a force nearly enough to bruise. When they parted, they were still as one, clasped and joined. Will ran his fingertips across Hannibal’s right cheek, to feel the skin and the blood beneath, the heat that only appeared when they were close, near, *together*.

“You know Will? You worry too much. You’d be so much more comfortable if you relaxed with yourself.”

“You’d like that,” Will murmured, their breath mingling, “wouldn’t you.”

“Should I ask?”

“Only if you want to spoil the fun early.”

It was five days later before Will finally picked up the phone. Not that it had taken five days to build up the courage, but instead it had been five days of trying to stop himself from doing what he was now doing.

It rang seven times before being answered by a house maid. By the time the person he’d called for was put onto the phone, Will was leaning against the wall in their hallway at home, the sound of Hannibal’s harpsichord drifting down the stairway with spritzy staccato.

“If I asked you to stop it here, would you?” Will said before she had spoken, “Only I thought it might be worth a shot.”

“Truthfully I am simply glad that your conduct at my gathering has cemented my assessment of you as an uncouth, crude young man with none of the qualities needed to be a suitable mate for my nephew,” Murasaki said stonily, “Although I am sure you are happy that I shall not be inviting you back.”

“He’s angry with you, you know,” Will rejoined, “he might not seem it, but he is. So rude, to spread rumours.”

“It is not a rumour if it is true. If you cannot bear him a child, how long do you think your sham of a marriage shall last?”

“Longer than your affair did,” Will said bluntly.

Silence. Will savoured it for the truth it brought. The truth he’d always suspected, but never known how to voice. *The love Hannibal and Murasaki had once shared, many years ago, and now he had stolen it*. It only accounted for a fraction of her hatred for him, but at least it made sense of it.

“You try and riddle him with guilt, for being with me,” Will said, curling the phone cord around into his fist, “trying so desperately to find him a false little wife that he can resent and ignore, so that you’re the only one he has left to turn to. It’s the shaky foundation to the love you’re trying to keep. You just don’t get it, do you? Hannibal enjoys being coveted, and he covets what he wishes.”

The silence continued. He could imagine Murasaki staring straight ahead, *perhaps dark eyes cold but struck by truth*. *People would move around them like spectres. Or perhaps they would be the spectres, standing at the grave side. Will wasn’t sure which way round the looking glass faced half the time.*

“And you feel as if telling everyone about my problems will mask your own. Is that why he’s so precious to you? When exactly did the doctor tell you that you’d never have children?”

The silence shouted a history of regret. Will knew it, because for him the history was the present. Only they could understand, even in their mutual dislike. Will knew he would find it, the moment of truth between them that would always be there, *a connection deeper than a knife could strike*.

“I was never caught, Murasaki. Just found. And as for Hannibal he’s no one’s fool, least of all yours,” Will said; as he made to hang up the phone Murasaki spoke, calm and composed but with an underlying anger that Will could hear like distant rushing water.

“Perhaps you are the fool, Mr Graham.”

Will couldn’t help but frown softly, fingers still tangled in the wire. There was a genuine triumph to her tone that put him on edge, but also a sadness that he could not explain. *Anger, resentment, disdain*, those he was used to. Her statement, though barbed, verged on concern, and that was something not so easily dismissed.

“Maybe,” he said eventually, “or perhaps we both are. I suppose I’ll just have to find that out for myself. Don’t bother mailing any more invitations, they’ll go straight on the fire.”

With that he placed the phone in the receiver. The harpsichord was silent. Will knew Hannibal was listening. He walked up the stairs gently, running his hand along the banister as he climbed. When he reached the top the sitting room door was blocked. Hannibal observed him with a subtle triumph.

“I do believe Bedelia was correct,” Hannibal said.

“What?” Will asked, allowing Hannibal to take his hand and kiss it softly.

“You’re more dangerous than you look,” Hannibal smiled.

Rejection/Assimilation

Chapter Summary

> “What is this, Jack?” Will asked tightly, scratching his head, “Target practice? Are you doing this to, what? See how long this can go on for before I get nasty?”
>
> “You mean you haven’t been nasty up till now?” Jack joked with a raised brow.
>
> “Oh, that was nothing,” Will smiled wryly

It all happened in an odd moment of weakness.

Will wasn’t sure if he was feeling pressured to blame it on something else other than the truth. The bad start to his day perhaps: *he had stubbed his toe coming out of the shower, and later spilled coffee all over his hand when he tripped over a bag he’d left lying next to his chair.* Or maybe that his luck had continued as such: *by lunch, realising he’d forgotten to take his tablets and, only then, realising he couldn’t find them anywhere. He’d felt itchy with worry, ending up having to call into the local Dynamics centre for an emergency dose, then to the GP for a new prescription.*

Everything mundane, everything everyday. Even when Hannibal called at four thirty: ‘I am sorry darling, a few more things I must clean up before I make my way home. I shall be late.’

Just another hidden resentment, in amongst the trivial things.

But he knew what was wrong. He knew what was always wrong because, these days, it was the little centre to his universe, churning and burning away in the background while everything flew around in its gravitational pull: *the new fertility treatment, which he’d been on for nearly two months, had yet to bear fruit. Instead all he felt was a constant stream of frustration, anger, aching pains in his back, sporadic, unfounded paranoia and the most lucid dreams he’d ever experienced.*

Yet he already knew that his obsession was solely focussed. It was that day Will realised that having a child was focused tightly at the centre of his life, but not necessarily at Hannibal’s.

He wouldn’t say Hannibal was acting overtly different, just...somewhat secluded. Oh they talked, sure, they slept in the same bed, they ate the same meals when they were together. But his mate seemed removed from the proceedings, as if he always had his mind on something else.

Even their sex life had become dull and routine, only doing so when it was at a peak time for Will to ovulate and heighten the chances of conception. All the spontaneity had dimmed from their attraction, and even the overblown and manipulative schemes Hannibal employed to seduce him had fallen by the wayside.

He had asked a couple of times if everything was going well at work, and Hannibal had said that he was settling into the new position nicely. No rough patch, no having to deal with troublesome colleagues. There were no upcoming reviews. There was no trouble with the neighbours. There was nothing Will could see that would make Hannibal so constantly distracted and disinterested.

Except, of course, the one thing he hadn't considered: himself. The fact that Will had been solely focused on this one thing for nine months now, perhaps to the detriment of everything else. The rabid hormones wouldn't allow him to concentrate, which might have been why his academic research and writing had been so chaotic and uncollected recently. He couldn't entirely blame them, but having his paper rejected by the *Journal of Forensic Sciences* had only rubbed salt into what was becoming a festering wound.

A couple of times over the past week Will had fallen low enough to even entertain the thought that Hannibal might have met someone else. Be having an affair. In those moments the fear of it being true was so cloying and constrictive that he was forced to stop before the scenario built any further in his mind. It was inconceivable, and yet he'd thought of it so it couldn't be *entirely* inconceivable.

So the trip he'd taken to the store for groceries became a messy affair, the kind that included buying a single malt on impulse and wondering, as he stood with the bottle of amber spirits in his hand, what the hell he was doing; it had been a long time since he'd bought spirits. Hannibal wasn't there to question him. It was an odd feeling, to even think it; why would he filter his impulses through thoughts of Hannibal's approval? He'd rather not consider the ramifications.

By the time he'd pulled up outside his empty house, three heavy plastic bags in his hands and keys held between his lips, it had only fit with his luck so far that the fattest of the bags ripped open silently and sprayed its contents bumping and rolling over the pavement.

"Mother *hucker*," Will mumbled around his keys as he stood still, eyes closed, and took a deep breath.

"You need a hand with that?"

Eyes starting open, Will couldn't help but jerk around to find Jack Crawford, dressed in a grey summer jacket and brown slacks, standing beside Hannibal's begonia bush. Then Will noticed his car, parked around the corner, almost completely hidden from view. For what seemed a significant few moments, they simply looked at each other. *A minute of surrealism passing*.

Eventually, when Will knew the awkwardness was getting gritty, he sniffed and nodded. Putting down the other two bags, he dropped his keys into his hand and watched as Jack hunkered down to grab a couple of wayward grapefruits that had rolled into the flowerbed.

“I shouldn’t shop when I’m angry,” Will finally said as he grabbed a spare bag from his truck and held it open for Jack to drop in the items clustered in his arms.

“Oh yeah?”

“I always overfill the bags.”

“You spared the vitals,” Jack said, nodding to the flopped open carrier bag with the neck of the whiskey bottle poking out, “that an import?”

“Islay single malt,” Will said, unable to sound enthusiastic.

“Must have cost you a nickel or two,” Jack said as he dropped in the last of the things.

“Come in and I’ll pour you a glass.”

“Not only an invitation,” Jack said with a narrow eyed smile, “but an invitation with a twist? I must’ve done something right.”

“Maybe I need the company,” Will shrugged, avoiding Jack’s sharp glance, “would you carry this? I’ll get the others.”

The July sun was enough to warm the high ceilinged sitting room, blazing against the back wall in a glorious blanket of golden-orange. The soft mauve and oak of the furniture turned to a ripe plum in the light, while it gave the damask curtains the look of shimmering water. Will walked about in his bare feet because he liked the smooth feel of the floorboards, and Jack sat down in the large armchair which Hannibal favoured, his arms stretched out over the armrests and a distinct look of *getting-away-with-it* on his face.

When Will gave him a heavy crystal tumbler Jack held it up for Will to pour.

“Ah, that’ll do,” Jack said as Will tried to give him a double.

“Suit yourself,” Will said, giving himself a generous helping before unfolding down onto the sofa and taking a large sip.

It was an odd juxtaposition, he always thought, between the drinks he’d used to enjoy and the ones he did now. He’d been a bourbon man, until he’d met Hannibal. Now, even though he’d expected himself to go for home comforts, he’d automatically gone for the overtly expensive alternative which, to be truthful, he did prefer.

The peaty perfume burned as it permeated his mouth and nostrils, roaring down his throat to stoke the fire in his gut.

Lots of things had changed. Will bit at the inside of his mouth and tried not to think about it.

“So,” he said when Jack seemed content to settle in and wait for the conversation to begin, “this must be about Claythorne.”

Jack took an appreciative sip before licking the taste from his lips, “Can’t a friend just stop by and share a drink?” he asked.

“Is that a trick question?”

“Will...”

“You’re still on the clock,” Will observed; Jack hesitated and Will rolled his eyes, “you didn’t take a double, and you’re armed. Unless you were hoping to get into a shoot out with the neighbours in forty three, I think you might be here on business. You think just because I’m not on the team anymore that I don’t watch the news?”

“So you watch the news and you heard about Richard Claythorne’s arrest for killing his wife. Trying to impress me?”

“What is this, Jack?” Will asked tightly, scratching his head, “Target practice? Are you doing this to, what? See how long this can go on for before I get nasty?”

“You mean you haven’t been nasty up till now?” Jack joked with a raised brow.

“Oh, that was nothing,” Will smiled wryly, eyes fixed on the clock on the mantelpiece about the fireplace, “now, you’ve got about...half an hour before Hannibal gets home and passive-aggressive’s you out of the house.”

“We’re cutting to the chase? That’s a new tactic.”

“I’m all new these days,” Will said, watching his whiskey as he swirled the glass.

“Well, you already know why I’m here.”

“And you already know what I’m going to say,” Will said absently, feeling a sudden weight of loss on his shoulders.

For a moment there was nothing but quiet between them. It wasn’t the usual kind, the ones where Will had stood at the crime scene, mind ticking over, while Jack had watched and waited for the results. Or even those after they had solved a case and were simply standing in the quiet together, enjoying the serenity that came with success. It was odd, Will thought, that Jack had become a stranger in his life. He’d been his boss first, sure, but he’d been his friend second; and now he hadn’t seen him for five months and all they could do was sit awkwardly in the same room, avoiding the issue.

Will felt suddenly and unbearably alone. He swallowed the feeling down with a swig of alcohol.

“Do you want to come back later for dinner?” Will asked hollowly, “Hannibal’s cooking clay-baked pork. He always likes to show off with it.”

“Will...” Jack sounded frustrated, and disappointed, “this isn’t just about you or me. You know that. You’ve always known that. I’m not here to flatter your damn ego by begging.”

“You know me better than that,” Will said tightly.

“I thought I did.”

Will stayed quiet, because he didn’t want to even start thinking about what *that* was supposed to mean. Jack continued.

“I need an insight into this one, or an innocent man might go to jail for a very, very long time. I need someone to tell me what happened inside that house.”

“And that’s *exactly* where I don’t want to be.”

“Didn’t bother you before.”

“How the hell would you know?” Will asked seriously.

Jack sat back with a sigh and looked down into his glass, staring at it as if it were a third guest, “I could have sworn you invited me in.”

“Lucky for you I was so damn accommodating, considering you were loitering outside my house like someone you would normally get a restraining order against. Is that your new tactic? I might have to get an electric fence installed.”

“I know this matters to you, Will.”

“No, you know this matters to *you*,” Will corrected, but Jack didn’t stop.

“And I know,” Jack looked Will straight in the eye, “that when you read in the papers about Richard Claythorne being sent down for life that it’ll be in there, somewhere. You won’t mention it but I know you. You’ll feel it.”

“Drink your whiskey, Jack.”

“Not as fast as you’re drinking yours,” Jack observed.

Will saw Jack flick his eyes to the clock and felt vindicated that at least the threat of Hannibal’s arrival was a constant weight on Crawford’s visit.

“It’s been one of those days,” Will said without really saying anything.

“Enough to have you drinking in the middle of the day?”

“Yes,” Will didn’t elaborate because he knew Crawford might play the brash, arrogant alpha, but he was sharp as a tac; Will didn’t feel like talking about his problems just so Crawford could use them to manipulate him.

“I heard you were putting in another article for the *JoFS*,” Jack tried, sitting forwards to cradle his glass, elbows on his knees, “you heard back?”

“If you’re trying to dig for good news to put me in a better mood,” Will said as he finished his drink in a hefty, powerful swig, “you might want to pick another topic.”

“Ok. Alana told me you’re trying for a kid.”

Will gripped his glass tightly and ground his teeth, grimacing as Jack managed to touch the one raw nerve sitting exposed, “What the fuck does that have to do with anything?”

“Christ, you’re not any good for house calls today are you? She was just being a friend talking to a friend.”

“Alana likes to tell things to people she thinks might do her dirty work for her.”

“I’m not here to talk you out of it,” Jack raised his hand, “already had the lecture from Alana. I won’t be that guy.”

“Then why the hell’d you bring it up?” Will asked, frowning as his mind worked overtime, then opening his eyes a little wider when he realised, “Aw hell. *Jesus* Jack, is this because Claythorne has kids? Are you serious?”

“Just look at the files, that’s all I’m asking,” Jack said steadily.

“Lots of people have kids, you think I empathise with every sad sack I bump into in the street because they do and I don’t? Huh? I’m sorry Jack,” he said coldly, standing to put the empty tumbler on the glass coffee table with a very final *clink*, “I can’t help you with this one. Ask Alana, she seems more than willing to talk.”

“I don’t need Alana Bloom on this one, I need *you*,” Jack said seriously.

“Well that’s just your bad luck. I think you should go before you cause me any more trouble,” Will jerked his head at the clock. He hated that he felt he needed to use Hannibal as a threat, *and remembered the days he was able to throw Jack out of his own house under his own impetus,* “last thing I need right now is that.”

It felt like moving through dead air. Jack looked particularly solemn as Will took his empty glass and led him back down the stairs to the atrium. *The grand life he’d been given on a silver plate by Hannibal’s loving hands, enough to sometimes make him pine for the simplicity of his run down porch and the smell of motor oil in the carpet in his workshop and walking through the forest at night with nothing but stray paws for company.*

Beneath everything, the everyday problems and the new and the awful and the needy and the domestic, *Will wanted his purpose back*. Because without it he was afraid that he’d be left hollow and empty were Hannibal to stop loving him. Having it rubbed in his face by Jack that he was resisting coming back to work was just another way to keep the pain fresh.

Just as he began closing the front door Jack turned, standing with one foot up on the steps, the high Summer sun making him squint.

“She made me promise, you know.”

"...Who?" Will couldn't help but ask, jaw clenched, fingers tight on the door.

"Hillary Claythorne. She's seven years old, and she asked me to help her father come home because she misses him."

"For fuck's sakes, Jack..."

"I don't think he did this, Will. It's just that the evidence is proving me wrong, and I don't like when my intuition is proven wrong. I know you hated that too, but then you were always able to show just why you were right in the first place."

Will had nothing to say to that. All that he knew was that he wasn't closing the door in Jack Crawford's face.

"We have until next Tuesday. That's the court date that'll put it all to bed. You have anything you want to say to me? You call before then."

Watching Jack leave was like watching his conscience turn its back on him. Will sighed and the odd moment started; a familiar, almost bestial urge for *the hunt.* The want to know again how it felt to make a difference. It was a strange moment, while his fingers itched and his mouth turned dry, his heartbeat tripped over itself and he opened his mouth to let two words fall which he knew he would later hate himself for.

"Jack, wait."

"Something is bothering you."

"Really? First I've heard about it."

"Darling, I would rather not..."

"Then how about you don't?" Will interrupted him, before walking out of the kitchen with a glass of water in his hand, "I'll be in the lab. Don't disturb me, I'm working."

It might be prudent to say that Hannibal Lecter was not so far removed from the realities of normal relationships as to think that arguments did not happen. He and Will argued often, normally about trivial matters, sometimes about deeper problems. More often than not Will became more animated the longer the altercation continued, while Hannibal generally became more and more removed and cold as it went on. They were always resolved, always dealt with, and life went on as normal after the disagreement had forced a dip in the road.

But this was different. This was not an argument, this was *dismissal*. Will had been curt and to the point, not rash and angry. Hannibal, standing beside the freezer as he carefully placed the greaseproof paper packets of meat into the drawers, allowed his brow to furrow with curiosity.

Will was keeping something from him. The chill from the freezer was cut short as he closed the door and stood, brushing his fingers together to warm them as he smiled disarmingly. He could only think one thing as his smile sharpened: *how delightful*.

Since their marriage Will had been so drastically open with him that Hannibal had begun to believe him incapable of deception where they were concerned. There had been a terrible lopsidedness to it. Not that Hannibal would ever consider feeling guilty about his secrets. The lies he told Will were not dishonest so much as they were necessary evils; his darling was not yet ready to understand. One day there would be a reckoning, but it would need delicacy and preparation.

They had time. And during that time, Hannibal would prefer to ferret out the problem for himself rather than simply ask for an explanation of Will's behaviour. His mate was being wonderfully short with him, not his usual practical self, or even his usual hormonal tetchiness or brooding silence. The treatment he was currently on, being funded by Hannibal's considerable new income that came with his promotion to Head of the surgical unit at St James, had been thoroughly messing with Will's system. Hannibal was more than aware of that. Yet this was different.

As Hannibal walked through the house, cup of dark coffee in one hand and suspicion in his eyes, he caught sight of it. In the sitting room, on the small serving table beside the resin replica of the *Winged Victory of Samothrace*, sat the wide based, crystal decanter his second cousin had gifted him on his wedding day. Hannibal walked closer, placing his mug down upon a coaster on the coffee table. Lifting the crystal bauble on top allowed him to pull in the scent of whiskey, *a single malt if he wasn't mistaken*, and note something further.

Two glasses missing. Normally there were three, arranged neatly next to the decanter. Only one remained. Hannibal looked around the room, eyes quick and bright. There was a flowery scent in the air. Walking to the sofa he thought he caught the vague hint of Will, still clinging to the leather; *his mate's scent had been effusive as of late, what with the hormone treatment.*

Nothing else seemed out of place. Very odd. After another look around Hannibal sniffed, finishing his coffee before sinking down into his usual armchair to think.

Which was when it hit him. Beneath the flowery scent was another, familiar smell. Hannibal turned his head minutely towards the back of the chair, his nostrils flaring as he pulled in the air. *The flowery scent a decent cover for the heady musk lingering beneath, a rival scent in his own home hiding like a stowaway.*

The rush of territorial anger was enjoyable only to resist. Hannibal had always loved suppressing his biological urges. They were so petty, and yet so viciously powerful; the feeling built and built within him until he knew there was a flush of heat at his neck. His tongue poked out to wet his lips as he let his head fall back against the chair and the feeling passed, leaving a heavy glow in its wake. Something akin to coming down from a high, or resisting the release of orgasm.

On opening his eyes Hannibal saw the ceiling, and the fresco around the main light, lit by the heady orange of the dying sunlight. He took another long breath in and smiled at the thought of his darling, down in his lab at the bottom of the garden, swamped in secrets.

And, inside, the gifts spilled out.

A red belly, open.

Emptiness inside? No, not emptiness: a little bundle of memories.

Memories passed on through genetic code, winding and twisting through cells, multiplying, and building. A hand, blobs of fingers curled, an eye growing steadily with the opportunity to see. A small bundle of ready life cut short.

In his lab at the bottom of the garden, Will Graham pinned the enlarged crime scene photographs to his white board in a semblance of order. Together they built a bigger picture, one he wasn't entirely happy to see, and yet...

...and yet there was a pull there, or maybe a push. He felt it as if at his back, a pressure, urging him forwards every time he considered packing up the files Crawford had given him and dumping them back at Quantico. The pressure would intensify and he would feel the *itch* and he would want to know more. Will always wanted to know more, when the push took him. Also it was something he could use to focus on instead of worrying about Hannibal.

One female, dead, found tied to her double bed by the wrists, abdomen opened crudely with an unknown weapon (probably a hunting knife Zeller had posited in his report) and her unborn foetus removed. In his hand the paper print out of the report became a grounding focus, something concrete in the here and now.

[*Maybe Hannibal had met someone at work, another surgeon perhaps. Someone of his own status, his own social class. Good looking and well connected. Someone who could give him everything he needed and be more than just a momentary distraction.*]

Richard Claythorne, 41, reportedly came home at 19:30 after having had a fight with his omega spouse, Jennifer Claythrone, earlier that evening. He had been drinking and was over the legal limit. When he returned he found her mutilated and murdered in their bedroom in the quiet, rural suburb of Cockeysville; much in the same fashion as two other women in the past year and a half – a Stephanie Waller, 22 year old college student, and Helen Greer, 35 year old librarian. Claythorne called the police and then proceeded to contaminate the crime scene by trying to make his wife's corpse less undignified.

[*Or worse, maybe it was someone Hannibal knew. What about that woman, Bedelia de Maurier wasn't it? Weren't they good friends? Murasaki had apparently been pushing them together for years, hoping Hannibal would propose to her. Hannibal did seem fond of her after all. Maybe he was meeting with her, having dinner with her, fucking her, preparing to make a life somewhere else.*]

Will flipped a few pages ahead, fingers tight on the paper: their other daughter, Hillary, was staying with Jennifer's sister for the night with her cousins. Mr Claythorne also had no alibi, other than he said he'd gone up to Oregon Ridge park to sit up the trail and drink for a while

before heading home – only the rangers station could confirm seeing his car on entry, but no one could remember seeing it leave.

[*Or perhaps the worst of all – Hannibal was simply tired of him. There was no other omega luring him away. Hannibal was bored of putting up with Will Graham and his neuroses, and he wanted him out of his life, once and for all.*]

Will stood back and looked at the collage of red mess and white sheets on his wall, grinding his teeth. Focusing on the pictures made for a good distraction in a bad way.

Where's your proof? he asked himself, *You know how this works. No conclusion without grounded evidence. No verdict without truth.*

[*Hannibal with his hands on another, looking at them with that tender affection which Will had only ever found levelled at himself.*]

He felt sick. Closing his eyes only made it worse, because then he could see it clearly, all around. He forced himself to concentrate on the case. The pendulum swung, and the room built itself up like Lego bricks, one at a time into place...

Down into the one place he knew he shouldn't be. You're strong enough for this, he reassured himself, don't back out now.

When he finally returned to the house a few hours later Hannibal was absorbed in his study, typing furiously on his laptop. *Just ask him*, he tried to convince himself, *just ask him and put this all to rest.*

Tired and drained, with a head full of murder and despair, Will went up to bed and was asleep before Hannibal joined him.

It was a few nights later that he knew it had all slid too far. Just as he was able to phase back into his work, so did he also move back into the mindset: drenched in the mind of another (*a killer, a murderer, a father, a husband*) in order to ignore his own jagged thoughts. Things were terse, and yet it only appeared to make Hannibal more reclusive.

For three days now Will had been thinking of nothing but the Claythorne case, pouring over the evidence tirelessly down in his lab, contacting Katz and Zeller for updates they were happy if not cautious about giving to him. Looking, no *staring* at the photographs until, with Jack's help, he'd even visited the crime scene while Hannibal was at work. That had been an experience. *Just like riding a bike*; the blood seemed fresh behind his eyelids, and the ripe body opened like a twisted fruit, split and gored. *His own hands red and dripping*. God, he'd missed this. And yet at the same time, he detested it. The duplicity was draining, and warping. Will knew he felt displaced.

He'd done his best to avoid Hannibal altogether. Keeping it a secret hadn't even been part of the original plan, it just ended up...happening. And once Will had gotten away with it for a

couple of days he just felt it wasn't worth the trouble to stop. Things would work out. They always did.

And then things had gone wrong. Will should have known better than to believe his own bullshit.

He'd fallen asleep. In his chair, in the study, he had drifted off while staring out at the garden. A storm had blown in that afternoon, and was in full swing by the time early evening had arrived. Gale force winds up to ninety five miles an hour made the glass shake when it gusted. The trees moved like water, washing back and forth, silver and green maelstroms. The sky rushed past, dark grey and teal, violet and umber. It made the world seem unstable.

The chaos had lulled him, and behind his eyes the dark things in their cages lurked. They smiled from behind the bars. *Welcome home, Will Graham,* slipped from lolling tongues. Opening the lock and letting the door swing free seemed anathema, and yet...and yet there the room played out its tune.

The blood pooled deepest at the centre of the mattress, bulbous and dark like an ink blot.

Did you want me to take that life into my hands? Will asked. The empty room seemed to draw in around him, clawing pitch, filled with howling. *Betrayer and usurper, the mother and the child both.*

We loved you, darling.

Stupid whore, think I'm a moron? Think I'll keep the child that mocks me, a cuckold in your womb like a festering tumor!

You loved us both, the cry returned, a woman's voice, *and then you stole it away.*

Behind him. Will froze but could not move. It was behind him, he knew it was. *Run, run, run*. Only he couldn't. Could barely move at all. Turning was painfully slow, like moving through thick syrup, a strange buzzing sensation against his skin. His heart was pounding and he wanted to breathe, to *breathe*, but it hurt so badly and he was frightened to...

"You see, Will," Garrett Jacob Hobbs stood there, milky eyed and blue lipped, gushing blood from the holes in his chest as he grinned through red stained teeth, "you see."

He didn't really remember much after that. He was running, that he recalled. Only he wasn't sure if he was dreaming or not. *Hide*, that was all he wanted was to *hide*. Couldn't let the claws find him because...

The walk in closet in the main bedroom was closest and it slid closed with a satisfying snap. When he fumbled with the light Will realised how badly he was shaking. *Click*, dark. He crumpled down into a ball on the soft carpet and shook.

"Don't make me look," he pleaded with no one, his words nothing but muttered whispers as he pushed his hands over his ears and tried to block out the voice, "don't make me see."

Hours might have passed. He wouldn't have known. All he could feel was the heat of his skin, and all he could hear was the beat of his heart, thrumming like a maternal rhythm. Yet the voice continued: *you see, little boy, look at you curled like you're crying in your mama's lap. Sweet connections, dontcha, have 'em tangled up in your brain. Tugged by all the bad men when they walk across your web.*

It took a while to realise there was another sound. A voice that came from outside of his skull. And hands, there were hands on him. One gently shaking, while the other pushed fingers through his hair. After a couple of minutes the hands managed to coax his own away from his ears. Will could hear his breathing was low and shallow.

"Darling," he heard, the steady timber and the calm tone soothing his raw nerves, "can you hear me?"

"Yes," he was whispering when he could, "yes."

"I'm going to help you sit up. Relax for me?"

He did not fight, because to do so would be pointless. Hannibal sat him up against the wall of the cupboard, then, once he had him where he needed him, he picked him up and carried Will to the bed. *All that time he kept his eyes shut.* Somehow, he wasn't sure how, he managed to grab hold of a retreating hand.

"I am right here," the words were said from somewhere above, and then closer, by his ear, "right here. Would you open your eyes for me?"

It wasn't dark, but the blue gloom was obvious; *sun through storm clouds*. Will thought the chaos must still be thick outside. Looking up from where he held the wrist, Hannibal sat there by his side. His hair had fallen down over his right eye, and the crimson of his sweater seemed deep and rich. His mouth quirked up when Will found maroon eyes.

"There you are."

"They're still here," Will said, trying not to see the grinning lips, split and ruined between the gap into the cupboard door.

"You have been looking inwards. I am sure you thought I could not see it. Yet you are a wonderful mirror, darling. Tell me what you see."

"They'll always be there," Will murmured, "Can't be without myself, can I? Would I have opened her up and pulled it out? Deserved it, they both did. I would, if it were you. If you'd done it, I would have coated my hands to make it right."

There was a shine to Hannibal's eyes that Will couldn't take his eyes from.

"I think I remember it sometimes, like it's real. Like it's something I saw once. You and me, split and trapped. If you'd ever done it Hannibal, I would have," Will knew he was making little sense, *but the very thought of Hannibal touching someone else made him lose all ability*

*to think straight, "*No. *No*, I don't know. Hannibal, I just want it to stop, for a little while. Please. For a little while, I just don't want to understand."

A soft touch against his brow, steady fingers against his cheek, "It is difficult, sometimes, to see past the inside," the sound of ruffled material, then the click of a lock or a box lid snicking open, "perhaps a little alteration is necessary. I have often thought that a wider view is preferable to a narrow tunnel. Open your mouth for me."

Two small, white pills. Will watched as Hannibal placed them onto his tongue. They were a little dusty but utterly flavourless. When he looked up he could see Hannibal swallow two of his own. In the back of his brain, somewhere, he wondered if this was wise, considering. It was only then he remembered he had no idea what he'd taken.

"You could be poisoning me right now and I wouldn't even know it," Will said quietly as Hannibal sat down next to him.

"I'll have you know I made them myself, and I'm a wonderful chemist," Hannibal said as he guided Will to him; Will slipped his head into Hannibal's lap and enjoyed the warmth and the scent of his mate.

"I meant on purpose," Will said, his head swimming; he closed his eyes, "That's what people do when they want rid of their spouses, right? He should have poisoned her. It wouldn't have scarred as badly; her or him. Maybe that made it worse, seeing the little one in the flesh. I don't know. He killed her though. He killed all of them, all those women, I know he did."

No reply. It was then that Will remembered he was supposed to be keeping that a secret. *Oh*, he thought, *well, it was bound to come out sooner or later.* There were no secrets in love and war; sometimes he felt that they might be one and the same.

"Jack was here, a few days ago," Will admitted, opening his eyes once more.

"I know."

Will blinked at him, then smiled and shook his head, "Of course you do."

"I take it this has to do with the Claythornes."

"Did I tell you that?" Will asked, frowning; he felt a little light headed, coupled with the strange sensation that his voice was deeper somehow. His limbs felt soft and pliable, and his shoulders relaxed down until Will felt as comfortable as a cat.

"I watch the news, and I can't think of any other reason Jack Crawford would be inviting himself into our sitting room."

"We were friends, you know," Will said abruptly, "we were friends when we worked together."

"Jack Crawford is not your friend, Will," Hannibal replied seriously.

Hannibal's voice seemed like it might be at an odd pitch too, smooth and elongated, "What an odd thing to say," Will said softly as he pushed carefully up the bed and curled around Hannibal's side.

Outside, the tree branch nearest to the window smacked against it with a ruffling hiss. Will jumped and laughed loudly. There was a splash of colour to every sound of the rain cracking against the window, or the leaves rustling to get in. Will let himself fall back against Hannibal's strong chest and had to press the back of his hand against his mouth to stop from giggling. The skin felt tickly against his lips. He had the distinct feeling that there might be music playing but he couldn't quite hear it.

"I think I might be hallucinating," Will said, voice laced with humour and amazement.

"I should hope so."

"What did we take?"

"Gammahydroxybutrate."

"GHB?" Will let the laugh out because there was no point to keeping it in, "Why do you know how to make this?"

"Is there a reason I shouldn't?"

"I suppose not," lifting his hands up Will stared at them; he couldn't tell if they were stained red or if it was just the ceiling light shining through his skin, "he killed her, you know."

"Who, darling?"

"Claythorne. He killed his wife. Jack's adamant he didn't but he's wrong. I...think I might need to speak to him, just to make sure."

"Jack?"

"Claythorne."

"Will," Hannibal said, pulling Will's blurry gaze to him, "you do not need this to make your life whole."

"I know," he shook his head, laughing even though he couldn't remember what was supposed to be funny, "No, what am I saying? I don't know at all. Can't have kids, can't write academic papers for shit, can't even keep you interested in me. What the hell else am I good for but this?"

And it was an odd thing. A very odd thing. At first he didn't even notice it, perhaps because the sounds of the room were enhanced and almost effluvious, making his senses blurred and fuzzy. But it was unmistakable. When Will rolled his head to the right, Hannibal lay next to him, laughing.

It wasn't as if he'd never seen his husband laugh, just not like this. His eyes were closed and his mouth was open, his chest shaking with the exuberance of the act. The laugh seemed to have taken over his body, manipulating it until Hannibal curled his hands around his torso as if to hold himself in place. It was difficult not to join in. Soon the room was bouncing with sounds of joy.

Will found himself gasping for air, rolled onto his side as he wiped tears from his eyes.

"What a-are we..." Will choked, coughing, "what're we laughing at?"

"Will, my dearest," Hannibal had managed to get himself under control, the remnants of his outburst making his speech fitfully jerky, "the very idea that I would no longer be interested in you is enough to make the most stoic show their humour," rolling onto his side to face him and pull him awkwardly into his arms, "I do so love you, my darling."

"Right back at you," Will said, feeling a little stunned by the sincerity and openness of Hannibal's words.

The kiss was soft and sweet. Will leaned into it. Every place their skin touched seemed to sing in harmony. Will thought he could hear the music again, louder now but still indiscernible.

"So you're not having an affair?" Will asked without thought.

"That is what has been troubling you?" Hannibal asked, sounding genuinely surprised.

"Wouldn't it have been troubling you, if you were me?"

"I doubt we would have survived it," Hannibal said, briefly pursing his lips as he sniffed, "the very thought. I could not conceive of another's hands upon you."

"Hah!" Will let the sound out in a puff, curling deeper into the embrace, "I know exactly what you mean. But you've been so distant. I thought maybe you were, I don't know..."

"The truth from your lips, it pierces," Hannibal murmured into Will's ear, "You did not know, therefore I was already exempt from this imagined infidelity. *Inconceivable*, yes? My behaviour has merely been to give you the space I thought you would appreciate. I know that when my biology takes hold, I would rather be left alone than smothered."

That it all made perfect sense was only more damning. Fuelled by his paranoia, he had allowed himself to believe his own fantastical scenarios rather than the truth. That Hannibal was a wonderful, loving husband, just as he would be a loving, wonderful father. They would be happy together, if Will could only learn to accept what he was.

Hannibal already had.

"Fuck me," Will muttered, muffled into Hannibal's shirt.

"Is that an exclamation or a request?"

“Neither. I just thought it fit my mood. Hannibal?”

“Yes?”

“Thank you.”

“You need never thank me darling. I shall always be here when you need me.”

There should have been a finality to those words, spoken with the surety with which Hannibal said everything else. Will kept his eyes closed to hide the fact that he couldn't fully take solace within them.

It hadn’t been difficult, mainly because everyone in the offices knew him well by sight, and Hannibal always made a good impression on those he met. Hannibal had appreciated it more now than he ever had before, because knowing Janet Hannah at reception, and Robert Halam on security, and Alicia Conner and her partner Joe Baker from Major Fraud, allowed him simple and yet disgustingly easy access to the fifth floor at Quantico.

He had been signed in and given a visitor’s pass by Janet, and then Rob the security guard had escorted him all the way to the Fifth floor while telling him some inane story about his engagement to some omega from Wisconsin with jet black hair and a tattoo on her thigh, *Lecter had politely offered congratulations*. Then they had run into Alicia and Joe, who were more than happy to see him, take him the rest of the way to the BAU offices, and prove quite useful in validating his original theory.

“Yeah, Jack said he’d been waiting to hear from Will,” Joe said, his almost bald head shining in the fluorescent light, the ring of grey hair from ear to ear seeming superfluous to his trim image, “and I can understand why Will doesn’t want to come himself. Never did seem entirely happy here.”

“Joe, for Chrissakes,” Alicia shook her head as they walked onto the busy office floor, “Graham was never that bad. Guy’s as tough as old boots. Don’t listen to him, Dr. Lecter.”

“Not at all,” Hannibal answered, unable to keep the low-level smile off of his face.

Such a wonderfully mischievous feeling, being here amidst the FBI’s finest and being able to walk around as a free man while they smiled and shook his hand and offered him counsel. He would call them fools, but that wasn’t entirely fair. They were as mannequins, imitations waiting for the end to come from a bullet or a tumour or old age, once their lives had lived out their usefulness. It made him smile a little to himself that he had once seen Will in the same fashion, before he had realised his mistake. Before Will had become the most real thing in his life.

These people here, Hannibal couldn’t help but pity them, just a little, although he was in too good a mood to waste his time with banal thoughts of others. He took a seat in the hard chair across from Crawford’s office door and waited.

By the time Jack arrived, Hannibal was half way through silently appreciating the *adagio* of Bach's violin sonata in G minor, *sitting in the memory of the first time he had heard it played, in the courtyard at his aunt and uncle's estate in France for their small gathering of eight, with the warm air making the sweat bead between his shoulder blades and the sheer beauty of the violin virtuoso frowning as he played savagely and Hannibal, only just sixteen as he was, thought it may be a beautiful enough piece to have playing while he slit open the fiend he had trussed up in their third barn, the one no one ever went near and was always locked, the fiend Hannibal had tracked to a small holding near their summer house and waited until nightfall to catch as he stumbled home drunk from the local pub, the violin's peaking and falling notes reminding him of the the man's squeals as he had tightened the rope around his ankles, and then falling silent as he had leaned in, breathing five words into the man's ear that caused him to shiver and stop struggling altogether.*

'Mischa Lecter sends her regards.'

Opening his eyes was akin to waking up. The violin had fallen silent and Hannibal regarded Jack Crawford as he felt he may have looked at Hannes Kutzke all those years ago while the man's eyes rolled back in his head and Hannibal began his work as carefully as he had seen the local butcher do to the pigs when they were brought in from the slaughter.

"Hannibal," Jack said stoutly, "what a pleasant surprise."

"Now Jack," Hannibal said, standing and shaking hands amiably, "I thought we'd known each other long enough not to accept blatant untruths."

"Did Will send you?" Jack asked, ignoring Hannibal's words.

"May we talk inside?"

"Sure," Jack sighed, holding the door open for Hannibal, "look, if this is about..."

"You know what this is about," Hannibal interrupted, taking a seat without being asked; he allowed Jack the chance to sit down before continuing, "This is a strange role reversal, is it not?"

"I don't follow," Jack said, stalling.

"Me asking you to stay away from Will Graham," Hannibal smiled, "as opposed to those fond days in which you used to request the same of me."

"I only had Will's best interests at heart," Jack justified, already becoming defensive, "your interaction was affecting his work. You knew that then."

"And I still do. Only now, it is the work you have forced upon him that is affecting his life. But then it always has, hasn't it? Which you know better than most," Hannibal continued on, even as Jack opened his mouth to speak, "you know the consequences of what you are doing to him, and yet you flaunt them. Does that make you cruel, Jack? Or simply foolish?"

“I’m really pretty busy, Dr. Lecter,” Jack said with forced politeness, his flat smile not reaching his eyes, “if there’s nothing else?”

Inclining his head, Hannibal stood, but when Jack rose to open the door for him Hannibal merely walked to the table at the other side of the room and poured himself a glass of water from the jug there.

“You know, I’ve always thought you badly underestimated him,” Hannibal said, “Will, that is. A fragile little tea-cup, isn’t that how you described him once? If dropped, he might smash, and no one would ever be able to put the pieces back together again.”

“And you think you can?” Jack asked seriously, closing the door, anger clear in his features; it was never easy for an alpha when another invaded their domain and took control. Something Hannibal knew all too well.

“Oh, you misunderstand,” Hannibal said as he turned to Jack, taking a drink, “I intend never to drop him.”

“Christ, is there a point you’re getting to any time soon?”

“Oh, you would prefer the direct approach. I see. Well, then I shall simply tell you this,” Hannibal put down his drink and walked forwards until he and Jack were face to face, merely a foot between them, “Will Graham is more than capable of handling himself, but he is weak in the face of your forced morality and currently in no mental state to survive what you would happily put him through. It is something I do not appreciate. If you ever attempt to manipulate him into anything such as this again, I shall not be held responsible for the consequences.”

“And I will?” Jack said darkly.

“Most certainly,” Hannibal said casually before he walked around Jack and opened the door, “Oh, and just in case you were wondering, Claythorne is guilty. Good day, Agent Crawford.”

There was a purposeful silence as Hannibal sorted his coat in the doorway, and when Jack Crawford said “Good day, Dr. Lecter”, Hannibal thought he heard that same tone.

The tone of someone that knew their eyes were looking at a man, but their intuition was able to see something sinister resting just beneath the skin.

Hannibal smiled in return. He would allow for the leniency of Crawford furiously disliking him, maybe even suspecting him, because Hannibal knew, as he always had, that he and Will were divine in comparison to the lowly livestock that surrounded them on a day to day basis. He had little to fear from Jack Crawford other than rebuke.

Hannibal knew he was too careful to be caught. The shadow of his beautiful family demanded discretion, and he wasn’t one to disappoint.

‘I choose my friends for their good looks, my acquaintances for their good characters, and my enemies for their intellects. A man cannot be too careful in the choice of his enemies’
Oscar Wilde

Experiment/Reaction

Chapter Summary

> “What’s life without chance? Striped bass, there’s lots of it where I’m going. Sometimes get some rock bass too. You liked it last time I brought it home.”
>
> “I do enjoy something that had to struggle at the end of a line on my plate. I would not say no.”
>
> “Carnivore,” Will labelled Hannibal with a smile

When he awoke he knew it was too early. He had always been a late riser, partly to savour the hedonistic qualities of sleeping through the morning sun as it tried desperately to wake him; mainly because he preferred the night to think.

And play. These days the dark was a welcome blanket of secrecy.

Will, on the other hand, awoke when the birds were still singing. He assumed it was a left over from living with a father who liked to fish while the fish were just stirring. Hannibal wouldn’t go as far as to call him a morning person because Will was in no way personable in the mornings. He was awake, yes, but not yet ready to face people. Hannibal found himself an exception to this rule, but the postman, parcel couriers, electrical engineers or any workman and, on occasion, neighbours did not find themselves as lucky. It was one of his most enjoyable pastimes, overhearing Will’s stoic silence broken only by icy monotones while the visitor slowly realised their mistake.

They had begun the day apart and ended it together nearly every day for one year and one month exactly. Which was why, when he woke on that particular morning, it was a surprise to find himself lying against a warm body. Not only that but when his bleary eyes blinked into focus he found the blue readout on Will’s tacky, cheap, but -under-no-circumstances-was-he-throwing-away alarm clock read 9:22.

I must have moved in the night, was his first thought. He distinctly remembered falling asleep on his back, hands resting comfortably upon his abdomen. Now he was on his side, moulded to the outline of chest and jutting hip. Hannibal sniffed and stretched, savouring the tensing and pressure in his limbs, held until released in relief. Lifting his right arm he curled it over Will and held him close, placing his head comfortably onto his chest and then opening his mouth to say,

“It is not...”

“Shh,” he was interrupted softly, “look.”

Blinking, Hannibal watched as Will’s left hand lifted and pointed slowly and carefully at the picture frame on his nightstand. It was still empty, had been for a few days now. Previously it had contained a picture of their wedding day, both standing upon the grand steps of the Basilica of the Assumption, Will handsome in his dark grey tailored suit, smiling brightly to hide his dislike for pomp and ceremony. He’d been looking for something to replace it with, something newer, less staid. And now...

Now something else had decided to paint them a picture. A spider, fat bodied with grey and black striped legs and a wonderfully patterned opisthosoma, was spinning a web. She had already laid out the thick spokes and was about half way through joining up the uniform spiral wheels, industriously working to complete her creation. For a silent few moments he simply watched her, enjoying the rhythmic and meticulous way she grabbed the silk with her hind leg and tapped it in place to weave her masterpiece. It was somewhat soothing. He ran his hand gently over Will’s chest and down to his hip, taking a long breath and letting it out gently so as not to rough the air.

“How long have you been awake?” Hannibal asked.

“Uhm,” Will paused as he pushed his head up the pillow to check the clock, “nearly an hour? I think it’s been about an hour.”

His limbs woke as his mind did, his body stirring as his senses mapped out the room, *warm, almost too warm, filled with dulled sunlight through the curtains,* and the lithe form pressed against him, soft skin, relaxed muscles and boundless enthusiasm, “So delicately patterned,” he observed casually.

“She’s a labyrinth orbweaver. Must have come in with me from the garden. There’s lots out there in the laurel at the bottom past the lab.”

“She will be happy posing in the picture frame?”

“Fraid not, she won't survive inside. I'll take her back out later. Huh, it must be the draught, from the window to the door. I feel it sometimes in the morning if the weather’s bad. She must think there’s a chance it’ll be a fly highway. Beautiful, isn’t she?”

“Certainly.”

The air was filled with the sound of silent sharing. Hannibal listened to the dull thump of a heartbeat and tried to discern if it was Will’s beneath his ear, or his own pumping through his veins. Sometimes he found it difficult to tell. Two pairs of eyes watched the spider weave; Hannibal liked to think both minds saw the same beauty within. *Closer and closer the wicked rhythm drew.*

It had been a month since their anniversary. *A year in the company of another.* And it had been a month since they had both been forced to face the worst of each other; Will finally opening up to him about his intimate ordeal with the infamous Hobbs, and Hannibal...

Unlike other things, it was an evil upon which he did not wish his thoughts to linger. *Struggling hands fighting him, panted breath and a voice, urgent and openly shocked, begging him to stop.* The taste of the memory was unsavoury, seen as it was through a red haze of consumption; Hannibal was never proud when he felt hijacked by his hind brain.

Yet the swiftness with which the madness itself had come was matched only by the swiftness with which it was discarded. Will had forgiven him and it had not been brought up again, yet...the unpleasant feeling it left in his gut was difficult to flush away. To a certain extent he did not feel it was something that was deserving of forgiveness; rather a sin to be carried. The very thought that he could be controlled by something as base as his biological need. To force his unconscious desires so brutally, so savagely, with no thought whatsoever.

It was tasteless. He wanted his love to always be something he would never think twice about devouring.

The bruises had only just faded but they left a dull shade to Will's pale wrists, if one knew what to look for. Thus it lingered, just like that shadow. Sometimes when he set his hand upon Will's shoulder unannounced his mate would tense, even though Hannibal knew Will was well aware of who was touching him.

It lingered.

It was something he was not used to, having to continue living in close quarters with someone whom he had wronged. Normally by this point he would have left, to observe from afar; or they would have met a far more magnificent end as a display for his avid bloodhounds at Quantico; or be a feast for the worms.

And perhaps a feast for others.

The enigma was that he allowed it. There were times he questioned himself on what he had been thinking when he took on this bizarre coexistence with another. With one who could not only make him feel such shame but also endure it.

Sometimes he even surprised himself by becoming angry at the thought of his brutality, of forcing his darling. Or at times it made him quiet and subdued. He knew it would fade in time but was still amazed when the feeling struck him and he knew it for what it truly was; *guilt*. It had been such a long time since he had sincerely experienced the feeling that it made him almost nostalgic.

And yet he felt it was not something to be learnt from, rather something to be utilised. Trying to learn from it would be an exercise in futility, as Will had already ceased his hormone therapy which, as far as Hannibal could tell, was the main reason for his symptoms of a blind, aggressive need to procreate. Instead he felt it was more...a pro forma of sorts, leading to a further understanding.

Pulling the connection tighter.

There was an intimacy hidden within their ability to cope with trauma that reflected the synchronicity of their blossoming relationship. Will was nothing if not a survivor, and in

surviving one must adapt. For if there was one thing constant about his William it was that he never shied away from the distasteful and the macabre. When Will found a dark place he did not turn on the light as others would; instead he slunk down inside the gloom and opened all eight greedy little eyes.

That hunger, that *need to know,* had reappeared in the last place he'd expected it to. In the bedroom his husband had found his footing in the provocation he found necessary to cope, and seemed to be interested in understanding how and why their serene life had been bloodied from its source. Their unfortunate encounter before their anniversary seemed to have spurred this sudden urge to test. Will was nothing if not a scientist who based his world in logic while his mind floated in possibility. Hannibal too felt that he had been tainted by this systematic approach and had begun documenting his own findings.

So far he had concluded that: *Will enjoyed handing over his control to another person only if they too were in control*.

Recently they had begun experimenting with dominance. It was a prickly and yet seductive topic. There was no pain involved, for Hannibal disliked the idea that control could only come through fear of harm. Instead they tended to take the psychological approach, for Hannibal preferred the idea that one could be manipulated through a web so intricate that the person stuck inside could barely see the threads; and from what he had seen, he thought, so did his darling. So far it was the most intense and provocative game they had played since they had met and, as far as Hannibal was concerned, that was saying something.

Will had even thought of a charming safe word: palindrome. Hannibal liked to think that the equilibrium of their distaste and their acceptance was encapsulated within it. Sometimes he liked to think the word encapsulated them too.

A beautiful symmetry that became the snake eating its own tail.

"Engrossed," he eventually said, snapping the spell and returning to the real world.

"Mmm?"

"You are," Hannibal said as he gestured to the spider with a lazy forefinger.

"A little," Will sniffed, pausing, "Every day. She'll do it every day. Spinning like some old woman in a fairytale. She's already laid the trap lines, see them going up to the right hand corner? She'll sit there and wait for something to hit. They're as good as blind, orb weavers. Or maybe short sighted is better," Will sniffed, "She has to wait for her prey to struggle. Then she'll run down and wrap them up. In case it's something dangerous, you know? Like a wasp."

"A planner then?"

"She's precautionary, not just reactionary. But then that's millions of years of evolution for you."

"You admire her."

“Who wouldn’t?”

“Arachnophobia is common, but I would say the simple dislike of spiders is even more so. Liking spiders? You are certainly in the minority.”

There was a slight smile in his voice when Will said, “Oh, so you’ve finally noticed have you?”

“That you are utterly singular? Since I laid eyes on you.”

“Good answer.”

“But for this specific fascination you have with the eight legged, I think perhaps it is more, how should I put it? Common ground.”

Will had begun to absently run the fingers of his right hand through Hannibal’s hair, making the man sigh contentedly and relax further against warm skin. It was not often he allowed himself the luxury of comfort for comfort’s sake. Will was perhaps one of the few he could stand to deliver it.

“Maybe once,” Will replied.

“Trying to convince me that a change of profession changes the man?”

“It’s too early in the morning for this conversation,” Will rolled his head back to centre and looked up at the ceiling, drawing in a long breath through his nose, “I’m surprised you’re in the mood.”

“All time is relative to its content. In another perhaps I wouldn’t have the enthusiasm.”

“Or is that *with* another?”

“Perhaps.”

“Hannibal,” Will puffed a short laugh and rolled his eyes, “you’re as bad as Jack sometimes, you know that? Worse even. It would be nice to have a simple conversation some time. One with yes or no answers in it.”

“So I am not allowed to compare you but you are allowed to compare me? How selfish of you darling.”

“You called me a spider. I would be offended, you know, if I didn’t like spiders.”

“But you do like spiders.”

“Yeah,” Will agreed with suspicious levity, “I suppose you’ve got a point. I won’t argue with you.”

“One must be a hunter to catch a hunter. Ah! See how regular it is,” Hannibal observed the ever diminishing spiral, “No line thicker or thinner than the last, all spaced with such strict

regularity. A genetic understanding, it seems. Knowing how to work the catch without ever being taught."

A silence as delicate as the pattern upon the spider's body crept into the room. The fingers in his hair continued softly. Will did not reply, though Hannibal could feel neither aggression nor anxiety from his mate. Will felt...cautious. Dare he say it, expectant.

Hannibal had not brought up Hobbs directly since Will's confession a month prior. Instead it had become part of the game, and Hannibal refused to be overt when playing the game. Hobbs was an ace up his sleeve, and he didn't want to reveal his ammunition without covering it in silk first. Smooth and strong and inescapable.

In the end Hannibal, still laying upon the bed, decided to give Will another full minute, counted on the ugly, tacky digital clock, but nothing was forthcoming. He sniffed and decided to bide his time, pushing up onto his forearm to look down at the mess of trimmed hair against the pillow and alert, grey eyes watching him kindly from above a smile and below a frown. At that moment Hannibal's stomach rumbled.

"Smooth sweetheart, real smooth," Will murmured as Hannibal leaned down to kiss him; it was slow and involved. The act itself was rather mundane but Hannibal always enjoyed the subtle battle for dominance that Will seemed to instigate without thought. When they broke apart Will's eyes were closed but his lips were smiling, "anyone ever told you that you're a great kisser?"

And just like that the conversation was truly closed. Will liked to use the trivial to shut down unwanted trains of thought. *Yet all still remained unfinished, perhaps more so than before*. How did his darling put it? *The cages of his mind were open*. Hannibal smiled and let his imagination run wild with the concept while Will trailed his fingers absently across his back. He would dig deeper, later perhaps.

"Not to my knowledge," Hannibal finally replied.

"Well, now you know," Will glanced at the spider even as he spoke, "so are you going back to sleep?"

"Morning appears to have me in its clutches. Perhaps I shall draw. The sight of beauty always evokes a need for creation. They used to make paintings, did you know? Cobweb paintings, using collected spider silk as a canvas."

"Who the heck has time for that?" Will muttered, frowning as if he thought the cobweb would always be more beautiful than anything that could be painted upon it.

"I do believe monks of the Austrian Alps."

"Monks, figures," Will sighed, then covered a yawn, "nothing better to do with their time. Except make wine. And probably drink it in the cloisters when no one was looking."

"How wonderfully blasphemous. I do hope it is true."

“So, we’re both up, it’s late...

“Only for some,” Hannibal muttered.

“...and I’m starving. Eggs Benedict?”

“Do we have smoked salmon?”

“Got it a couple of days ago at the deli. And chives, from the garden. That plant’s growing out of control.”

Hannibal spared his right hand to reach out and cup a roughly stubbled cheek, stroking downwards to create a smooth glide against the hairs. Will smirked and stretched, eyes crinkling in pleasure.

“Don’t know what you’re looking so smug for,” Will said, voice warped as he yawned, “you’re making it.”

“I am?”

“You are. I think I’ll watch her for a little longer.”

Hannibal looked to the spider, still spinning with no thought for them. *The intricate observing the intricate. The blind watched by one with eyes struggling to open*. *Will with his gaze facing inwards, seeing himself in a spider’s spinning.*

Hannibal could pander to a whim if it were to such an attractive end.

“I shall call when it is ready,” Hannibal said as he sat up and swung his legs over the edge of the bed.

A week later and the sun was baking Baltimore into the nineties. People walked about outside in t-shirts and shorts with red necks where sun-cream had been missed. Kids jumped impatiently up and down next to cars stuffed with buckets and spades and beach towels.

He drove past an ice cream truck as he turned out of their neighbourhood and headed for the main road, its jingle passing in an eerie Doppler effect. Will wound down the window and turned the radio on, trying to find something worth listening to. He found a station playing a seventies block, Zepplin’s *Immigrant Song* was pumped out at the populous as he drove from the urban to the wild.

Thursday morning, early, no traffic other than the drivers eager to get into work before the bell and impress their bosses. The sun was already powering into its working day. Will licked his lips and enjoyed the warm air blowing in, the changing smells of the city as he drive through, morphing to the cleaner scent that came from forest trees lining the road and the sight of the river through the gnarled trunks of oak and beech.

Journeys out of the house; places closer to himself than high walls and bespoke furniture; being far from the madding crowd.

There was always an expectant peace when he knew he was going fishing. Not just something to look forward to but something to be swallowed by. No writing, no thinking about research, no worrying about work and deadlines, no stress. *Just the stream and the sun and the gossamer line.*

Simple and isolating and utterly selfish in its relief.

Will was a good fisherman. He knew how to let out the line to give the fish some semblance of control. He knew how to reel in without causing so much distress that it fought hard enough to escape.

Sometimes he preferred letting life progress as he and Hannibal had become accustomed to, with a random, unpredictable element to cut through Hannibal's own brand of obsessive control.

Then their anniversary. Then feeling unsafe in his own home. In his embrace. Then being unable to live with that kind of pain. Will wasn't one to run from pain. Instead he wrapped himself up within it like a cold blanket, burrowed inside to find the centre. Absorb. Only this was a proving...different than usual. More difficult. Closer. Intimate beyond what he'd ever felt for the mind of an unknown killer.

Yet there was a similar feel to it. *Sometimes that same rush, when they played the games that started simple and snowballed into the Machiavellian.* The love he was given, it seemed like a shine that glossed over the surface; night time rain. Sometimes he thought that if he reached out and touched Hannibal that his hands might come away wet.

It would take time, he knew that. Time and patience.

Will was a good fisherman.

He was on the motorway when the phone rang, and had a difficult time getting the Bluetooth around his ear one handed.

"Yeah?" he eventually answered as he fumbled with the volume button on the radio to mute the music.

"Still driving?"

"Hannibal. What did I forget?" he asked on instinct.

"To say goodbye."

"Ha, really? And you say I'm the one with abandonment issues," Will shook his head and watched a sleek, red ford Mustang slowly overtake him in the fast lane, "I left you a note."

"I saw it. Very perfunctory. I thought we were going to the park today, the botanic gardens are hosting a rare hothouse orchid display."

“We can go later, if you like. I just...wanted to take advantage of the good morning weather,” Will stretched the truth, quick to change the subject, “Did Alana call? I thought I heard the phone ringing when I left.”

“She did. Dinner on Thursday.”

“Dinner and a show,” Will smiled, thinking of Hannibal’s need for theatrics in the kitchen.

“It gives me little time to prepare.”

“And yet you always pull it off. I could catch something, if you want.”

“You would like to inject some chance into the occasion?”

“What’s life without chance? Striped bass, there’s lots of it where I’m going. Sometimes get some rock bass too. You liked it last time I brought it home.”

“I do enjoy something that had to struggle at the end of a line on my plate. I would not say no.”

“Carnivore,” Will labelled Hannibal with a smile, “So, is Alana bringing anyone?”

“Someone named Charles.”

“Charles? I don’t know a Charles. You didn’t ask?”

“I did not ask.”

Then suddenly there was an odd sound of a bump in the road, echoing slightly, odd because it came from over the phone.

“Are you driving?” Will asked, frowning as he moved into the far left lane for the upcoming turn off.

“Yes.”

“Ok. Didn’t know you were going out.”

“You didn’t ask.”

“Hannibal, really, next time I go fishing I’ll be happy to wake you at the ass crack of dawn, drag you from your bed and make you compare fishing flies with me in the dark, ok? But that’s never going to happen, is it.”

“How unadventurous of you. You make me seem like a troll who must not be awakened till after nightfall.”

“Sometimes you are.”

The car in front drew closer as it slowed and the turn off approached; Will drifted into the tide of cars heading for the Patapsco. It was then, as he laughed while Hannibal began

extolling the virtue of fairytale trolls, that the red Mustang which had passed him earlier suddenly dropped back and flicked his indicator to cut in. Will shook his head and stayed steady. He could see the guy driving as he stared at him through the window, lifting his hand to gesture sharply; *young, arrogant face, sharp haircut and overly pricey looking sunglasses, an embarrassed looking woman in the passenger seat*. Will cussed into the phone as the man tried to nose in when Will slowed, honking his horn.

"Christ, alright, alright," Will slowed to a crawl and waved the guy through, sighing at the roaring of the oversized V12 hurtling in front.

Better to give in than let the idiot cause an accident. He carried on up to the junction, slowing to a halt. Will cranked up the handbrake and slumped in his seat.

"I seem to have missed something," Will heard Hannibal say.

"Just some idiot kid overcompensating for something," Will replied, shaking his head, "look, I'd better go. I'm nearly at the park. I'll be back by two if you still want to go out?"

"Of course," Hannibal said, "enjoy your wade into the steam darling."

"I always do," Will smiled, "bye."

"Goodbye."

Will watched the red Mustang turn right and speed off along the straight; Will turned left and paid at the toll booth.

What he did not see was the sleek, black shadow of the Bentley sneak out from the queue three cars behind him, turning right to follow in the wake of the red Mustang's arrogance.

"He brought it as a gift."

"It does not go with anything I have prepared."

"It doesn't matter. Just, I don't know, serve it with some cheese later on."

"Montrachet is overpriced rubbish."

"Hannibal please," Will looked over his shoulder quickly to check their guests were still at the table, yet he couldn't help the laugh puffing out because the entire day had been one disaster after another and this was becoming a cherry on the sundae, "just pour the wine. And pretend to like it?"

"I only work miracles in the kitchen," Hannibal said, unimpressed as he jammed the corkscrew into the offending bottle, "you ask a lot of me."

The entire day had been slightly bizarre. That was the best way Will could think to put it.

Firstly, the cat.

The next house along, number 43, had a grey and white tabby cat named Sprinkles. Will would admit he wasn't overly fussed about cats. They were pleasant enough when friendly, more than vicious when not, but he didn't dislike cats. So Sprinkles had, to an extent, been given a free pass to wander across territories, so to speak.

Sometimes Sprinkles caught birds in their garden, Will had found feathers. Sometimes he walked along the tall fence that separated their properties. Sometimes he yowled in the night like he was being put through a mangle. Once Will had even found him curled up and sleeping soundly on his chair in his lab hut. While Will kind of liked the random element Sprinkles injected into his pet free life, he knew their furry interloper annoyed the shit out of Hannibal because the man had begun to plant more rosemary and lavender around the fence as deterrents. Personally Will assumed it was the thought of cat hairs upon clothing and upholstery that did it.

Sprinkles had never ventured into their house. Not, of course, until Hannibal had taken the four rock bass Will had caught earlier that week out to defrost. It had been a special sort of odd to walk down the stairs, as he flipped through a brochure for the upcoming street festival, and find Sprinkles the cat hauling a fish as big as itself across the floorboards. Will had just stood and watched until the cat was down across the back steps and out into the garden.

When Hannibal found him sitting at the backdoor, watching the cat happily tear through scales and gobble the white flesh inside, he had merely questioned him with a look.

"I couldn't help it," Will shrugged, "it looks like it weighs as much as he does. I thought if he could make it to the door then he deserved to keep it," he smiled as Hannibal sat down next to him, looking at the cat as if he wondered what it might be like in the oven, "Besides, there's a couple of striped trout in the freezer too."

"I'm sure Charles will not mind having the inferior meal," Hannibal said with a glint in his eye.

"This isn't going to be a thing tonight, is it? Just because he's an anaesthesiologist?"

"I don't know what you mean, dearest. The animosity between surgery and anaesthesiology is a myth. Now I must take out the other fish or there won't be time to prepare it."

Will wasn't buying it. Hannibal was far too proud and vain not to give his guests the best cut of meat. He feared for Charles before he'd even met him.

Secondly the fact that their guests turned up unreasonably early. At five o'clock they had been in an intimate position when the doorbell rang.

The unfortunate position had come about because, since that afternoon's run in with the cat, Will had begun subtly pestering Hannibal. At first it had just been a joke, making Will laugh under his breath whenever Hannibal sent him warning stare. Then it had become a challenge to see how long it would take to make the man crack when he was already irritated. It was so rare to find Hannibal noticeably unsettled that Will found he couldn't resist.

He began moving things around in the kitchen when Hannibal wasn't looking so they were in a different spot when he returned. Putting music Hannibal disliked on the stereo. Rubbing his slippers across the floorboards as he walked so they made a grating sound. Moving all the ornaments he came across at odd angles to the edges of their pedestals.

It had been five minutes to five, as Will had been in the process of rearranging Hannibal's immaculate place settings, when he was grabbed forcefully from behind. One arm looped around his torso and arms, pulling them tight. The other wrapped its hand around Will's throat and held it with gentle threat. A swift inhale and Will went stiff as he was pulled flush against a solid chest and a deep, almost rumbling purr emanated from next to his left ear.

"It is dangerous," Hannibal said while Will tried to struggle, "to take your eyes from your opponent."

"Can I help it if your neuroses are so fun to pluck?" Will asked, drawing in a deep breath to test his bonds.

"Spoken by one who knows what it is to be neurotic."

"Touché."

"It seems you are intent," Hannibal leaned in to run his nose gently along the curve of Will's throat; there was the barest scrape of teeth, "on having me dance to your tune."

"Seems like I have to..." Will's breath hitched and he closed his eyes as the arm at his throat tightened barely, but just enough, "...to deal with these little things you choose to share. These oddities. Best to do that directly."

"I would say that the pragmatist in you is glowing, while other parts are perhaps going out."

Will turned in the grip with difficulty, knowing Hannibal was savouring the feel of Will exerting his own form of dominance; the arm that had once caught at his throat now cradled the back of his neck, "Maybe they've all gone out. I'm good at seeing in the dark."

"I don't believe you. How would you prove it to me?"

"Oh," Will smiled, feeling his heart quicken as keen fingers played with an errant curl by his ear, another curled to a territorial grip in his shirt, "wouldn't you like to know."

"A demonstration?" Hannibal smiled, almost showing teeth, enough to cause a shiver down Will's spine...

...and the doorbell rang, "Jesus Christ!" Will blurted out, his whole body jerking in surprise, "what the heck are..? They're due at seven!"

When Will extricated himself from limbs and hands and the little bubble they had created together, Hannibal did not look in the least amused, eyes cold and intense. Will felt that even Hannibal's assurance that he would hold no grudge against the anaesthesiologist wouldn't hold up for the night.

Thirdly, Charles Nicholson was a very odd duck, as Will's father would have said. Red curly hair atop a bright, admittedly handsome face. A well tailored casual suit with a rather clumsy person inside of it all (he had already knocked over a hat stand, a glass of water and nearly toppled Hannibal's ebony figurine of a rampant stag, only saved from disaster by Will's quick reflexes).

They had planned to have aperitifs in the lounge but Hannibal had given Charles a tour of his home in order to waste the time Charles and Alana had created by showing up at five. Half an hour later a rather tense and agitated Hannibal was now looking as if he regretted the gesture.

"I'm sorry about the rude arrival," Alana whispered to him as Charles enthused over Hannibal's library and Hannibal carefully kept himself away from the man's fervent gestures, "he got his times mixed up."

"Seems like he gets most things mixed up," Will observed, raising an eyebrow, "I pity his patients. You know he doesn't seem your type."

"He's a friend of a friend," she cringed and shook her head, "I promised I'd take him out. I didn't plan on bringing him but he found out about my dinner invitation and...god this is going to be a nightmare isn't it?"

Will smiled and let out a subtle puffing breath and a snort, covered by a quick cough.

"Tragedy, comedy, they're pretty close right?"

Alana looked at him sideways, narrow eyes above a coy smile which refused to be the butt of the joke, "You know you looked awful flushed when you answered the door."

"Did I?" Will asked innocently.

"Yeah, you did."

She didn't say another word about it, but then Will knew she didn't have to.

It was suffice to say that Charles wasn't making the best impression on his host. It seemed the man was enthusiastic about, well, as far as Will could tell he was enthusiastic about everything. At first it had been odd, then entertaining, and then slowly it began to wear on Will's nerves. On several occasions Hannibal had caught Will's eye and held it, his face reading something along the lines of 'make this evening end, now preferably'.

Will was sure it was obvious only to him. Hannibal generally was.

"Hannibal, this is beautiful," Alana had said quickly after the first mouthful of the starter.

"Cheek and tongue, braised in plum cider," Hannibal explained.

"Oh ho," Charles had smiled, wagging a finger at his host, "I see what you did there. Very nice. A little heavy for my tastes. Maybe this tongue spoke too much?"

“I’m sure it doesn’t any longer,” Hannibal joined in the smile as he tapped Will’s foot beneath the table; Will caught his eye and frowned through his smile. Hannibal said nothing.

Which had led to now, with the unwanted wine on the table and the cobbled together cheeseboard, half devoured. The evening had turned chill despite the day’s heat and the fire had been lit in the grate. It cast odd shadows on the walls and made faces seem as if they were dancing with expression. Will had felt heavy with the weight of the meal and the strange stress of the day. The sofa pulled him down into its soft confines while the French windows allowed the last of the daylight to filter through. There was a hint of stars in the fading sky.

“Is it too early for a brandy?” Hannibal had asked as he stood by the decanter and poured himself a glass.

“Depends on the brandy, I always say,” Charles had said.

“Frapin, eighteen eighty eight.”

“Well then,” Charles had said eagerly, “it’s never too early.”

“Only the best?” Alana said with a raised brow.

“I always believe in only ever enjoying the best of what you can have,” Hannibal said, “though I’ve not long finished a particularly special home brew if you’d prefer.”

“Please,” Alana smiled as Hannibal inclined his head, giving Charles his brandy before walking to the kitchen and through into the utility room where Will had been adamant that Hannibal keep the brewing equipment (the shed was now off limits since being converted into Will’s ad hoc lab).

Then he noticed it. It was short and gone within a blink but Will didn’t miss the subtle look of utter jealously Charles sent after Hannibal’s retreating feet. Part of him felt like laughing. It was always difficult for strangers to accept Hannibal’s easy charm and the endless bounties of his rich lifestyle, especially when your omega date was responding far more to your alpha host than to yourself. Will felt like giving Alana a heads up to the fact that she was reaching the point of flirting but, truthfully, didn’t want to deal with the fallout.

Home never felt so strange when there were people other than he and Hannibal within its walls. He felt like he might be sitting in a zoo, watching the exotic creatures fluff their feathers and snap their teeth. It was only as he tuned back into the conversation he realised he was being addressed.

“I’m sorry, I missed that,” Will said.

“I said did you see the *Times* today?” Alana said again.

“Uh, no I didn’t get a chance to go out to the store. There was a thing, with a cat...” Will trailed off, “Why?”

“Big expose on Claythorne. Was kind of grisly, for the *Times* I mean. I think they’re trying to compete with the *Tattler* market. Started bringing up old bones. Can you guess who they unearthed to get their sales up?”

Will smirked wryly and scratched at the side of his neck, “I couldn’t imagine. Baltimore’s number one most wanted?”

“Bingo,” Alana shrugged, “seems he still turns heads.”

“Don’t think there’ll be a time when the Chesapeake Ripper doesn’t turn heads. Or twist them right off. Still, I don’t like it.”

“Like what?” Charles asked, a slight frown, “I mean that’s just journalists, right? Do anything for a story.”

It always made Will itchy, discussing something as personal as the Ripper with a stranger. Alana was permitted, she knew it all, she’d been there while he’d dipped down into the dark waters. He licked his lips, swallowed, sniffed, and tried his best.

“Putting him back in the news,” Will said, picking at his fingernails, “it’s not flattering to be the serial killer who gets ‘brought up’ when a story like this is breaking news. Makes him seem...passé.”

“Then that’s a good thing,” Charles said, sounding oddly sober considering all he’d shown since his arrival was carefree air-headedness, “No need to make sensations out of human filth.”

There was an urge to laugh. A need that Will only just managed to resist. It had been so long, *an age*, since he’d talked with a normal, down to earth person about his chosen expertise. Turned out that the normal, down to earth person could only see one half of the flipped coin as it spun through the air.

They saw the savagery and the violence and the hideous anarchy of a serial murderer. They couldn’t see the other half of the coin as it fell.

“Let me ask you this,” Will said, “you’re standing by a wasp’s nest but none of them have taken notice of you. Do you kick it?”

“Of course not,” Charles said as if it were obvious.

“It’s the same thing here. He’s not bothering the *Times*, then the *Times* shouldn’t be bothering him.”

“Pretty on the nose there,” Charles said, eyebrow raised.

“Sometimes you have to be,” Will said.

“Yeah,” Alana nodded, “but then we all know that the press like to flaunt danger.”

“Sure do,” Will said quietly, thinking of Freddie Lounds with little fondness, “*sure* do.”

A hand slipped past his field of vision and Will looked up over his shoulder as Hannibal handed Alana her tall glass of beer, the colour of honey with a thick head of froth. When the hand stayed pressed to the back of the sofa Will looked up, catching an enigmatic smile upon Hannibal's face as he leaned in almost conspiratorially.

"I don't know," he said as he swirled his brandy snifter, "there's a certain thrill in chaos. Sometimes writers thrive under stormy skies."

"Can we not talk about journalists?" Will asked sourly, "We were having a nice evening."

"Had some bad run ins?" Charles asked with a laugh.

"For someone with an aversion to company, my darling has always garnered attention from the press."

"Something no one wants," Alana chipped in.

"Seems the Chesapeake Ripper did," Charles said brazenly.

Will sighed, feeling his shoulders tighten, "Can we just..?"

"An interesting theory," Hannibal cocked his head and smiled, sitting down to Will's left in a high-backed chair, "do go on."

"Well the guy obviously loves the attention," Charles said with a cocky shrug.

"Who says it's definitely a guy?" Alana said.

"I did," Will cut in quietly, his skin feeling itchy with discomfort, "forty to fifty, white, well off. Does anyone want..?"

"Well I mean that's why he makes them wait right?" Charles continued to talk to a rapt Hannibal, "doesn't just keep killing people over and over. Makes people wait to see what he'll do next."

"He's a narcissistic sadist," Alana said, drinking her beer as she leaned in to the table to plate up some cheese and crackers, "what do you expect."

"Then you think he would be thinking of others when performing actions?" Hannibal asked.

"Yeah, gotta be, that's a narcissist's remit after all isn't it?" Charles said, drinking, offering a quick, '*damn good brandy by the way'*.

"He was never caught, maybe he just knew that constant flaunting would lead to incarceration," Alana said.

"I think..." Charles began.

Will stood up so suddenly that it garnered the attention of everyone in the room. He hadn't meant to. In his head he'd wanted to stand up quietly, make a plausible excuse and leave the

room. Now, with everyone staring, he found himself without the ability to lie.

“I don’t want to talk about this anymore,” he said bluntly, before walking out of the room and out of the back door into the growing dark.

In truth he wasn’t thinking about where his feet were taking him. They were taking him away from the cramped feeling, the claustrophobia of their voices, the utter, blind misunderstanding perfuming the room like a rank smell.

The padlock on the lab door was difficult to undo in the dark as he could barely see the combination, but finally it clicked. Will pushed in and turned on the lights, his shoulders relaxing as he closed the door. The smell was always comforting, even though he was sure that the faint turpentine, Kodak T-max developer fluid and luminol would be unpleasant to anyone else. He liked it. It felt real. Safe.

He pushed past the comfortable, second hand office chair, past the surfaces with their chemical agents carefully tidied away into plastic clip boxes and rubber mats with the Stanley knife he’d forgotten to put away earlier and the graph paper he’d been using, through into the room that had crept back into his mind ever since Alana had brought up the Ripper.

The room hadn’t changed much since he’d constructed it six months before. When he looked at it he was sure people would think it took him weeks to do, instead of the one night it had actually taken. *He’d woken from a nightmare at three thirty am when Hannibal had been seconded to Illinois on a complicated surgical case surrounding trials on paralysed patients with spinal injuries. Sweating and shivering, flinching at his own shadow, the nightmare clung to him like seaweed in shallow waters. He’s rushed out into the garden, shivering in the chill, and had started on The Room.*

It was pretty much a place he had used to empty his mind of that particular nightmare. *A dream of the Ripper. Only it hadn’t been of the Ripper, not truly, for he had not envisioned the Ripper, tried to think of his visage. Instead he had seen himself there, carving through skin, muscle and bone, watching with a single minded precision as he removed lungs, severed limbs and created horrific masterpieces. A dark memory of how much he had willingly absorbed of a mind so starkly ruthless that Will had been unable to help admiring it even as it revolted him.*

So he’d started one cork board, pinning up all of the copy evidence he still had from the case. Photographs of crime scenes, times and dates, case reports, maps with their failed attempts at trying to find patterns to his kills, newspaper articles. Then he’d begun emptying boxes of moulds that had been made of suspected murder weapons, reports from ballistics and the lab girls who had worked up some very creative ideas for how the Ripper had created his pièce de résistance, the Wound Man Jeremy Olmstead.

After four hours of pinning and placing and piling and joining together, Will had felt as if he’d done what he’d needed to do. The only problem was that, in emptying his head of the Ripper, he’d now created the man a space in the real world. A real, living environment. In a panic, seeing the evidence around him like a living memory, he’d closed the door and locked it.

Now he found himself back there. Key slipped from the hook he'd left it hung on, Will opened the door and stepped inside.

It was where Hannibal found him twenty minutes later. Sitting on the ground with his back to the wall, staring up at the world he used to revolve around. For a few minutes they existed in silence, broken only by creaking floorboards as Hannibal worked his way around the room, examining the emporium of blood and paperwork.

"I thought about burning it once," Will said after a while, scratching at his arm where he had thought he'd felt an insect crawl, "not long after I stopped working at Quantico."

Hannibal had stopped before a large scale print out map of the wound man, stuck to the corkboard like a prize trophy. It had been drawn on, written on and in some cases there were large holes in the paper which had been meticulously repaired with scotch tape (*Will had many freakouts during the Ripper investigation, one where he'd punched the print out so hard that he bloodied his knuckles. Then he'd sat in the room emptied of agents by his sudden burst of violence and slowly repaired it, muttering to himself the entire time about not needing a doctor even though no-one was there to listen*).

"You decided not to I see," Hannibal replied when Will didn't continue.

"Mmm. I...I suppose I realised it wouldn't have helped. It was all still," Will lifted his hand and tapped at his skull, "dancing around in here. Sometimes it still does."

"Oh?"

"I thought I told you not to psychoanalyse me."

"I merely said 'oh'."

"Don't play coy. I'm not...I just..." Will drew in a deep breath and stopped talking as he released it slowly, letting his head loll back against the wall.

After a short moment in which the silence returned, Hannibal walked over to Will and sat down beside him. For a moment Will was more amazed by the fact that Hannibal, in one of his most favoured suits (*Will thought the colour looked like sky blue on a cloudy day, and a shirt and tie the hue and texture of pearl)* sat down beside him on the dirty ground and leaned back against the wall.

"You feel you cannot let go," Hannibal posited as he looked up at the accurate cast of a hunting knife, small and curved; he reached up to run his finger along the stubby blade, "because it is too much a part of you."

"What did I *just* say, Hannibal?" Will warned.

"This is not psychoanalysis, darling. It is catharsis. Only half an hour ago you walked out here because you could not stand a conversation in which someone was badmouthing the prey you used to chase. I hope I do not need to tell you how unusual that is. "

“I just...” Will sighed shortly, hating that he couldn’t vocalise his thoughts clearly, concisely, “...I just think that no one ever saw him the way that I did, and parts of me, inside, they hate that and love that at the same time. I mean,” Will pulled his arms in around his middle and drew his knees up like a wall before him, “Jack never saw it. Even Jack. Maybe Alana, in fact I was sure she did, which is probably why I hate to hear her talk about it so fucking flippantly.”

“What, darling?”

“That the Ripper wasn’t what the media made of him. He was something else,” Will said slowly, “I just never got the chance to figure out exactly what that was.

“I used to open doors, right into other people’s heads. I would walk around inside as if I were someone else, but then I could always come back and close the door tight behind me, lock it. With Hobbs, he was the first where I felt the door was left ajar for a long time after he was dead. As if killing him only made the connection deeper. The Ripper,” Will stopped to observe the walls, shaking his head, “he was the first where I closed the door only to realise that I’d brought something back with me.”

Silence. Will chanced a look at Hannibal to find the man looking around the room as if trying to guess what that ‘something’ might have been. Giving in, Will shuffled closer until their bodies pressed against one another. Hannibal lifted his right arm and placed it around Will’s shoulders without a thought.

“Thanks,” Will said after a moment’s peace in which they both sat, observing Will’s inner madness and accepting it for what it was.

“What for?”

“Coming in here to get me.”

“Anything to get away from that awful man.”

“Hannibal, really.”

“He is singularly trite. I dislike him, and I am sure he dislikes me in return.”

“He’s jealous,” Will laughed softly, unable to stop the broad smile stretching his face, “you should have seen the look he shot you when you left to get Alana beer.”

“Remarkable,” Hannibal smiled in return, “that someone as strong as Alana would chose a mate so weak in mind.”

“Oh come on Hannibal, don’t be so ridiculous.”

“I know. She must be seeing him out of some sort of obligation I assume?”

“Friend of a friend.”

“Ah. Then all is clear.”

As they sat the wind picked up outside, making the roof creak and the papers ruffle as it slipped in through the cracks. Will leaned his head down on Hannibal's shoulder and drew in a long breath, savouring the scent of cologne and musk. In the comfortable silence he couldn't help but laugh, soft and low less because anything was funny and more because he felt nervous voicing it.

"You can ask, you know, if you want."

"What would I be asking, darling?"

"Thought I told you not to be coy?"

"How amusing. Are you working on your routine?"

"Prick. You know exactly what I meant."

"Of course, but I would rather you not tell me exactly what that 'something' you brought back was," Hannibal turned to place a soft kiss upon his forehead, "I would like to find out for myself."

"Ok," Will swallowed and huddled closer, "thank you."

"You are very welcome."

"Hannibal?"

"Mmm?"

"How long do you think we'll have to stay down here before they'll just leave?"

"Perhaps we should find out."

"Sounds fair to me."

Show/Tell

Chapter Summary

> “He sought others who could see the world the way he did and he saw that love there. He was looking for understanding. People like to label him as they label any other psychopath, but isn’t it what we all look for in life? Someone who understands us and accepts us for what we are.”

Chapter Notes

> Also to cutglasscaress, you pretty much predicted the tone of this chapter, no matter how much I tried to keep it light. I hope you enjoy the "ginger"...
>
> As for Darcy Taylor, in the book series she was Lecter's 3rd victim of which the FBI were aware. She didn't have a sister, but I went for a little creative licence.

“You can’t wear that.”

“May I ask why?”

“Well I guess you *can* wear that, if you want to be technical, but I won’t be there while you do it.”

“Then I propose I purchase you something matching. Perhaps good taste is transferable.”

“Give me a break. Look, there’s a line between pinstripe and looking like a pair of curtains in a catalogue. You’ve crossed that line.”

Hannibal turned from the full length mirror to regard Will, sitting on a wooden chair in the changing room waiting area with his legs crossed reading a food magazine someone had left behind called *Saveur*. Will had noticed the $45 price printed on the bottom left hand of the cover and had already decided to pocket it before he left and read snippets to Hannibal later while his husband prepped for dinner. Looking up from a full page glossy spread of a self proclaimed ‘ultimate chocolate caramel cheesecake’ Will was unable to hold back his laugh

on seeing the mildly affronted, stony look on Hannibal's face. Will shrugged and turned the page.

"I keep thinking that if you open your jacket I'll see a sunny day on the other side."

"Coming from a man currently wearing some checked monstrosity from..?" Hannibal prompted.

"Target," Will said without shame.

He was greeted with subtle distaste, "and the silk shirt I bought you for your birthday?"

"It's in the closet," Will said as if it were obvious, "for special occasions. Now are you going to the checkout or have you come to your senses?"

"I certainly have."

"Good. I'll be outside."

Once outside the overtly ornate and lavish dressing rooms (the stall curtains were red velvet and the chair he'd sat on looked like it cost more than their car) Will almost regretted not waiting for Hannibal. It was one of those shops, the kind that seemed empty due to the vast floor space pocked with elegant rails sporting barely two items each, wooden mannequins dressed in cashmere sweaters and pants woven from eight hundred thread Egyptian cotton. This left just enough room for the stares of the snobbish rich kids paying with plastic at the checkout and the condescending smiles of the staff to find him as he stood by a rack of trilby's and tried to look for the price just so he could complain about it later.

"Not the kind of shop where you look for a price," he muttered to himself.

When he realised one of the attendants was approaching, a tall, leggy blonde woman dressed in a pencil skirt and a red blouse, Will closed his eyes and sighed. She'd been watching them since they entered and he'd been keeping her in his peripheral in order to avoid her.

He hated shopping with Hannibal.

"May I help you with anything?" she asked, arrogantly polite; he was more than aware that she'd left out the 'sir'.

"Sure," Will said archly, "you can go outside and have a cigarette. If I have to watch you stand over there and bite your nails and lick your lips any longer *I'll* start smoking."

"I..." she looked taken aback, opening and closing her mouth.

Then a voice spoke from behind him, "Darling," and Will turned to see Hannibal leaving the dressing rooms with an attendant in tow carrying the offending dark chocolate, striped suit draped in their arms. Will let his shoulders sag and left the blond shop assistant looking insecurely at her nails.

"So you're not buying it?" Will asked.

“Of course not,” Hannibal smiled, small and subtle.

“Thank Christ.”

“I will have them take my measurements and tailor me two from scratch, of course. Although I must still choose a complementary colour for the tie. I was thinking perhaps coral.”

“And I’m thinking that if you think you’re buying *me* anything out of here then I might as well certify you.”

“Surely my greatest offense yet,” Hannibal smiled softly as he flicked through a book of swatches, touching each to gauge the texture, “would you see me behind bars?”

“Just out of your clothes,” Will shrugged, pointing to a pearlescent pink swatch to which Hannibal hummed his approval of the choice, “I think that’s more mutually beneficial.”

Eventually they left the bright shop and entered into the grey world of overcast skies and mild drizzle. Hannibal put up his large golf-umbrella and held it between them. Despite the weather the streets were quite crowded; people on their lunch breaks hurrying through with no care for others, families trying to keep hold of wandering children, shopping couples trying not to argue about where to go next. Will huddled closer to Hannibal’s side and put his hands in the pockets of his khaki jacket.

They navigated in silence, the supercilious attitude of the shop still clinging to Will like a cheap perfume.

“Anyway, I don’t need any new clothes,” Will finally broke the bubble of quiet, “I have clothes; clothes that I’m pretty happy with.”

“I merely wished to make you feel more comfortable when you arrive in New Orleans. Even scientists can be snobs.”

“*Even*? Don’t you mean especially?”

“Says the man who speaks for science.”

“Exactly, I know how they think. I’m a snob, I think I should know one when I see one.”

“I feel that somehow I should be insulted.”

“If you change the words it becomes a compliment. Uh, how about I say that you’re discerning? Anyway, you’re not the one going. I want to be comfortable, so just let me wear my damn suit.”

“As you wish. Still, if scientists are snobs then class is as class does, or so they say.”

“No one says that,” Will smiled, shooting Hannibal a sideways look.

“Maybe you haven’t been speaking to the right people.”

“I’ll be talking about the Chesapeake Ripper, Hannibal, I don’t think anyone's going to give a damn that I’m wearing a cheap suit if they care about the words coming out of my mouth.”

This seemed to amuse Hannibal to no end. So much so that Will spent most of the journey staring at his husband as they drove home to watch for the emergence of an enigmatic smile which seemed to disappear as soon as it arrived, hiding some inner humour.

“Do you think eggs are sexual?”

Hannibal, in the middle of pulling some minced meat from a greaseproof paper bag, looked up at Will with his usual blank but curiously amused expression and seemed to ponder. Will, looking down at the stolen *Saveur* magazine spread out gaudily on the oak table top, took a sip of red wine and extrapolated.

“I think he’s saying that eggs are sexy,” Will shrugged, “the guy who wrote this article, what’s his name? Michael Ruhlman.”

“His stance?” Hannibal asked as he began massaging the sausage meat into a bowl filled with paprika, chopped chives, crushed garlic and tamarind.

“Something to do with quiche, and creamy custard centres?” Will said while trying not to laugh, “I don’t know, this magazine is ludicrous, both in price and content. I’m beginning to understand that the emperor’s new clothes is a fable for the modern age.”

On hearing the rustle of greaseproof paper Will frowned, looking up, “When did you go to the butchers?”

“Oh, this is something I’ve had in the freezer for a while,” Hannibal said casually, “I’ve had a mind to cook it when the time felt right. Speaking of, darling, could I ask you slice the ginger?”

Will took the large, sharp chopping knife he was handed and the stem of knobbly ginger, putting it down onto the chopping board Hannibal pushed his way.

“How much do you need?” Will asked.

“Well, as ginger can be unpredictable and irritating at times, and in some dishes utterly unwelcome, I’d say an inch. Peeled and sliced thinly as you can.”

“Thought you liked ginger,” Will said with a raised brow as he set about preparing the root.

“Tastes are subject to change,” Hannibal said with a smile as he threw the torn meat into the deep, heavy based frying pan, “sometimes things just rub me the wrong way.”

Will didn’t question him. His husband’s capriciousness was infectious, in as much as it made Will feel carefree whenever it crept in. Hannibal was such a creature of habit that changes in routine or preference were always welcome. Will sliced the ginger as thin as possible until

the laid out pieces were as translucent fingernails. Hannibal slid them into the pan with the meat, adding the onions and the herbs.

“Well, I suppose this is a first we’re celebrating,” Will said as he returned to the table, taking a drink of wine, “me abandoning you, for once.”

“Should I say Freudian slip?”

“You can say whatever you like,” Will shrugged, “I’m leaving at, uh, about two forty five on Wednesday? Conference lasts four days. I suppose, during that, we’ll be able to see how the other half copes.”

“And I am sure I will be fine without you for a week, darling.”

“You say that now.”

“Our half, as you put it, has the luxury of not suffering through separation,” Hannibal said as he began adding the pre-prepared sauce to the meat, “not that I condone the inequality, you understand. Biology does not obey on a whim.”

“Oh of course,” Will said with shake of his head, “only that wasn’t what I was talking about.”

“I see, then you must enlighten me, as I am sure you will without request.”

“Mmm, I don’t know. I think it’s more fun to let you figure it out on your own.”

Hannibal sent him a warning stare, one with less warning and more stare. Hannibal did enjoy a challenge after all. Will took a drink and lingered in the feeling of eyes upon him, as if trying to touch; *testing*. He turned back to his magazine and the moment passed.

One year and five months since their exchange of vows. Will caught himself watching the play of light upon his white gold wedding ring. He didn’t think it felt that long. Time was elastic, compressing and expanding with the emotions of the moment. Up until a few months ago Will knew he was wary, still constantly amazed that he had allowed himself to end up caught in the sort of situation where he found himself tied to another so tightly that it itched at his skin.

Now, it felt like both a blink of an eye, and the age of time beyond time since he’d even first met the man currently dicing celery while reading from a small, handwritten card taken from his orderly recipe box. At times it was difficult to remember how much of life had passed by when they hadn’t known each other well enough to predict words, answer requests that had never been spoken and miss each other like severed limbs.

And yet Will knew there were parts missing. It had become a part of his existence now, that he knew his mate so intimately that he was well aware of the gaps. Just as he kept his own secrets from Hannibal, so did Hannibal keep his from Will. And that was ok. He could admit to himself that he did not always know why Hannibal was the way he was and not allow that to keep him awake. It had when they’d married, it had eaten at him. *Will always had to know*

why; *Will normally knew people, inside and out and all the bits in between, absorbed and subsumed sometimes without his consent*.

Not to say he knew *nothing*, he wasn't utterly without insight. Hannibal was easy to discern on the surface, but the deeper he dug the more he tended to hit stone rather than dirt. Recently, after months of trial and error, Will had decided upon the oblique approach to clinical psychology; observing the world as it was acted upon by the subject, instead of how the subject themselves reacted to the world.

The room which they were currently in, for example, spoke volumes.

Hannibal Lecter's kitchen. Just like the man himself there were obvious things which covered up and detracted from the truth: incredibly neat, clean countertops; the meticulous way Hannibal separated his ingredients into individual bowls in specific amounts before adding them to his cooking; the subtly expensive hardwoods used for the cupboards; the luxurious range of cookware and knives and fresh hanging herbs and the induction hobb and the quiet-close drawers and the pristine view of the back garden.

Will remembered the first time he'd taken his eyes for a trip over Hannibal's treasured room and picked out the one neuroses that couldn't yet be explained by what he knew of the man who owned it.

The doubles: that was the anomaly. Things came in pairs, where they could. The two bottles of sparkling water by the twin utensil holders, followed by two tall, blue bottles of perfumed rose water, for palate cleansing and flavouring Turkish delight. Two identical copper kettles sat beside the butler's sink, then down by the potatoes and the carrots in their dry bags, sat two tall, slim bottles of Sicilian olive oil. Inside the pot cupboard, two milk pans and two steamers. In the spice rack, everything was doubled up. On the windowsill sat a lone bonsai, but another was hidden expertly in with the cookbooks on the long wall shelf by the door, like a bookend. Even the pen and ink drawing on the wall was of an old fashioned kitchen sporting milk churns and cheese wheels, which Will was sure tickled Hannibal to think of a kitchen within a kitchen. Two light fittings, two freezers. Even Hannibal's antique coffee maker held a wonderful balance to its design, like a mirrored image.

At first he'd tried to explain it through logic; it made sense to have a second bottle or jar of condiments or ingredients in case the first ran out, and then the other examples may have only been mere coincidences. But then when he took it further...

Symmetry. He saw it everywhere. It leaked out into their household, beyond the kitchen door: two coat hooks in the atrium; the rack of antlers in main hall was mirrored by another at the opposite end; always two towels each in the bathroom; in Hannibal's embellished table displays everything came in pairs, *from apples to feathers to origami flowers*; strange twin copies of identical books resided in the vast library; picture frames upon mantelpieces always came in pairs; bowls of decorative items held pairs of each, *pine cones, wooden bell peppers, ornate seashells*; when Will left three glasses out by the decanters, Hannibal would come by and take one away to leave two; two mirrors in the bedroom; two chairs and two couches in the living room; two lamps in the atrium; two rugs in the front hall; two photographs on the main mantel in the living room; almost every suit in Hannibal's wardrobe was a copy of

another, residing beside it; two taps of his fingers against his temple when he was stuck on a problem; two sets of cufflinks, buttonholes, watches.

Symmetry was order, and order was control, but sometimes...sometimes he wondered if it was simpler even than that. He wondered if sometimes he tried to overcomplicate his husband, when really he should take the problem back to its root. Something ingrained, deeply so, something that would have to come from youth where the mind was still malleable and susceptible to programming.

Hannibal was a set of nesting dolls, always showing a new image when the larger one was cracked and opened like an egg, its contents leaking out slowly. Over time Will had come to his own conclusions about Hannibal's many personality quirks, but sometimes he wondered about the symmetry.

About the doubles.

Sometimes he wondered about Hannibal's sister.

"You have everything you need?" Hannibal asked for the second time.

"Almost," Will joked half heartedly, reaching up to clumsily cup his husband's smooth jaw and lean in for a chaste kiss.

The airport was noisy and cluttered at this time of day. Will wished he'd taken a later flight, but he knew he'd need the time to rest and settle himself when he arrived in Louisiana. It always took Will time to settle in an unknown environment, just walk around and orient himself with the layout before he could sleep. He wondered if he'd been a cat in a previous life.

"I am sorry I will miss it," Hannibal sounded genuine and Will smiled.

"I'll give you a private lecture when I get back, if you like."

"Am I to take that as an innuendo?"

"No," Will laughed, looking surprised, "damn, I probably should have made it one. I actually meant I could give you the lecture."

"I like to listen to you talk shop. Does that make us strange?"

"I hope so."

They leaned together, slotting perfectly into a gentle hug as the tannoy announced Will's departure.

"I'll call when I get in," Will said, a little muffled as he spoke into Hannibal's coat collar.

“Until then I will be waiting for your call.”

Pulling back was difficult, so much so that Will forced himself to make it seem as if it weren’t difficult. Truthfully he didn’t know who he was trying to fool. Hannibal looked up at the large digital departure screen to their left and his lip twitched, nose wrinkling.

“I should go,” Will said.

“Of course, darling.”

Will was sure the flight would have been long, if he weren’t so busy re-reading his preparatory notes, making sure he had the itinerary down pat, making sure his hotel bookings were correct, making sure he had time to visit other lectures and displays at the conference, checking up on his contacts and taxi numbers.

All so he could ignore the itch.

So far, everything had gone smoothly. From Airport to taxi, to hotel, to hotel *room*, to meeting his conference aide, to going to sleep, to waking up, to taxi, to conference centre, to signing in and setting up. Everything had moved like clockwork. He’d missed that, the efficiency of events like this. It reminded him of how his life had worked before he’d separated himself from it.

Their team at the BAU had always run like clockwork, mainly because most of them knew each other so well that no questions had to be asked. Will knew he’d been a spanner in the works of their efficient unit most of the time, mainly because most of the time no one knew what Will was thinking. Or would want to know even when they asked.

The only drawback he had found, so far, had been the endless number of people he had to deal with. Lectures, for Will, were quiet and rather intimate affairs. While he’d been teaching psychoanalysis and profiling at Quantico he’d been dealing with students who, while highly trained and accomplished in their own right, seemed to fall into two camps when it came to him; awe or fear. Not awe in as much as staring at him with dopey eyes and trailing around after him like shadows, and not the sort of fear that made people jump if he came too close or enough to stop them asking questions, but nearly all his students had fallen into one of those two camps. It created a very intense learning environment, but also one in which Will didn’t have to deal with much unwanted interaction.

It was only ever him talking to them and them listening to him. It was never social, which was how he liked it. Here, on the other hand, he’d been introduced to and asked questions by at least a dozen people before he even got to the auditorium. His throat felt itchy and he coughed a lot, blaming it on the air conditioning. Eventually the aide for his stage had spirited him away backstage to get set up, when a woman who passed them by in the grey corridor did a double take, then smiled tightly and walked back.

“The infamous Will Graham,” she had short, red hair and reached out to shake his hand even when he didn’t offer it, “looking forward to the autopsy.”

“I...I’m not sure...” he found it difficult to articulate with her still touching him.

“Just kidding,” she said, even though Will thought she didn’t look like she was in the joking mood, “don’t you kids joke up north?”

It had rattled him a little, but then most things did. Taking it and hiding it away was easier than bringing it out and dealing with it. Somehow, when he stood on the stage, everything dimmed back to a humming familiarity that allowed for peace of mind with which to counteract it. Will took a short breath through his nose and let it out the same way while the technician swapped over the podium’s microphone.

“Should be good now,” the man told him, doing a quick sound check, then adding, “sorry about that folks,” to the waiting auditorium.

Will nodded. He looked up the large digital screen behind him, flashing up with the first slide. The title was bold black on white.

The AFFECTIVITY of PSYCHOPATHY

“There won’t be any questions during this session, so please keep them till the end. If you do have a question get the attention of one of the conference staff and they’ll get you a mic. I don’t like shouting.”

Starting with the standoffishness he needed made him feel less exposed; it was just lucky he didn’t care about being rude. A few coughs. A couple of heads turned to mutter to other heads. Will waited until it was clear; he wouldn’t begin without full attention.

And then he began. It was nurturing. He remembered this, almost regressively, like the dull hum of a womb. Being submerged, finding his place and sliding back inside like an eel in the coral. Hidden and dangerous and something no one else wanted to touch.

“To not understand is to become afraid, as the maxim states; we fear what we do not know. In relation to psychoanalysis, and as I believe of science in general, the inclination is the complete opposite. We seek understanding of the pathological, at every black hole we wish to turn on the light and see what’s waiting there for us. Yet,” Will paused, licking his lips, “if we are to pour our beings into objectivity, why is it that we blind ourselves, purposefully, when it comes to understanding the minds of those in our society that we find the most distasteful, the most alien.

“The study of sociopathy and psychopathy is nowhere near as wide, or most think so, between that of psychopathy and affectivity. As Cleckley stated in the first study, psychopaths show a ‘general poverty in major affective reactions’ and a ‘lack of empathy or shame’. Psychopaths are incapable of emotional connection,” Will said the words individually, with emphasis, “it’s rule one in your handbook, I’m sure,” a soft laugh rippled through the auditorium, “so we dismiss it. We rule it out before it’s even spoken aloud. We base all of our collective data on this premise. As a scientist, I hate to think of data being

essentially falsified by being fed through a machine that refuses to fully understand that data on traditional grounds. The machine sees it as a *jump* from psychopath to someone with a healthy, emotional balance, instead of seeing it as what it is: a connective line."

They listened, without questions. Will appreciated that from a room which he was sure was statistically eighty percent alpha, currently being told what to do by an omega. It let him progress un-impinged; *he talked through reports, statistics, previous caseloads.* By the time they reached the meat of his lecture Will felt that the glasses he was wearing were no longer really necessary. It had been a while, a long while, since that had happened.

"When Garret Jacob Hobbs, known before his capture as the Minnesota Shrike, abducted and murdered eight girls he was incredibly specific as to his preferences in his victim. Same hair colour, eye colour, roughly the same height, weight, same age; all the same as his daughter, Abigail," Will felt his voice fall on the last word, clearing his throat before continuing, "yet for one of his victims, Emily Nichols, there were patterns in his behaviour that could only be explained by shame and regret. Emotions that should have been utterly inaccessible to Hobbs. He returned Emily to her home, tried to heal her wounds and make her, essentially, comfortable in death. Here we see the love for a daughter seeping into his treatment of his victims. And what a lot of people will be questioning now, yes I see your hands please put them down, I'll answer questions at the end. What a lot of you are wondering is that there were nine victims of the Minnesota Shrike, not eight.

"Official records state that Hobbs claimed nine, his ninth being Cassie Boyle," Will clicked and brought up a picture of the crime scene, as tasteful a photo as he'd been able to find, "but as far as closed case records state the ninth victim is perhaps another's work. Cassie also fit Abigail Hobbs profile, but Garrett Jacob Hobbs did not murder her. The killer who did wanted us to know that, know that he wasn't the Minnesota Shrike. There were inconsistencies with the display of the body, this killer was elaborate, *always* elaborate, in his displays. Also changes in manner in which she was killed, this killer was proficient and efficient, as well as the fact, the *main difference*, being that Cassie Boyle had her lungs removed with surgical precision.

"He wanted us to know he was better than Garrett Jacob Hobbs, while also showing that he was honouring Garrett Jacob Hobbs. This is a complex little hive of emotions occurring here; appreciation, pride, understanding on an emotional level to be able to care about the way the kill was perpetrated; we might call this a form of empathy. Psychopaths are pathologically egocentric, but here we see imitation, the sincerest form of flattery. At the time we labelled him a Copycat," Will took a drink of water from the bottle on his podium, "but my theory, the less popular theory as many of you are I am sure aware," he said with a self-deprecating smile, "is that the Copycat killer and the Chesapeake Ripper were one and the same. Please, questions at the end. Now, in terms of externalising and internalising we must consider..."

Old wounds, and old victims with old wounds. A cavalcade of slides, each dissected and dissecting. The Chesapeake Ripper stared out from each, calmly and with, Will was sure, a placid smile of appreciation. The Ripper had always enjoyed being enjoyed. Now he enjoyed that Will couldn't escape: *it always came back to the Ripper.* Will reminded himself that he'd almost refused to appear here, to talk about the man whose work would live on long after he was dead or caught, and yet, in the end, he had said yes.

Knowing why was damning and yet invigorating. When the time for questions rolled around Will felt that feeling dim. *Now*, he thought rigidly, *I'll be sociable.* Many age old queries were thrown at the stage, from accusations about the FBI's abilities during the case considering the Ripper was still at large, to questions about his methods, about unrelated topics, about his monograph. When Will began to get into the rhythm of trotting out easy answers, one took him off guard.

"If the Chesapeake Ripper is the Copycat, as you say, then couldn't he have been doing this for someone else other than the killers he was honouring, as you put it?"

For a moment Will stared out into the dim auditorium and wished he could see the face of the person who had asked the question. A woman's voice, she sounded animated but he wanted to see her face. *Know her intentions*. He remembered Charles and Alana and being unable to talk about the Ripper with people who just didn't *understand*. Will took a breath and forced himself to see past that.

"The Chesapeake Ripper is, excuse me..." he stopped, taking a drink of water, in order to stall, looking for the right words, "...well, the thing about him is that from the moment I started working his case I felt...I *understood* that he was unlike any psychopath I'd ever read about or dealt with before. Truthfully? I don't even know if psychopath is the correct label for him. So in relation to his patterns and how that may affect his reasoning, I'm afraid I don't have any conclusive answer.

"He has many of the pathological traits, yet he has an anomalous ability for patience, he could go months, even years without a display. He has great capacity for meticulous forward planning. He had little regard for those he killed but he had regard for those he imitated. And yes, I suppose there is a chance that there was someone he was trying to...impress with his work."

"Did he succeed?" the questioner said, sounding like she hadn't expected the answer.

"I'm sorry, I don't understand your..." Will swallowed as the meaning sank in; he took a breath and swallowed, hating the grittiness in his throat, "Are there any other questions?"

The next was completely unhelpful, "Actually I think I second that question," the next person echoed.

Will sighed, gripping the podium. The answer was one he didn't want to give, mainly because it meant remembering his decent; remembering how it felt to think as if he were looking out from behind another's eyes and *understanding*. And knowing that he would always understand. He licked his lips and closed his eyes as he spoke.

"For psychopaths, true psychopaths as we understand them, as you are taught about them, as is written about them...they have no capability for empathy. It's baggage, it's just worthless baggage that wouldn't do any good even if they could feel it. It gets in the way of their true strengths, which are manipulation and, when highly intelligent as the Ripper is, understanding a person inside and out to the point where they know you better than you know you. But to say they have no emotions?

“I’ve seen psychopaths work together before but the patterns are very distinct. I have never seen a lone killer *appreciate* others to the point of bonding with them. Appreciate and admire their capacity for violence and their ability to transcend, as the Ripper saw it, the mundane and the banal. To make art imitating the true pain of life. That death was the pain of life, but also the beauty of it. The problem, the reason, I believe, that we never got our hands on the Ripper was because of just that. He isn’t a psychopath, not truly. We couldn’t force him into the mould that all others slid into. He was...he *is* above that. He is a man who enjoys doing bad things, but not necessarily because they are bad. There was a very specific reason for his murders which sure, included your run of the mill narcissism and sadism, but underneath that there was something that you might want to call empathy. When I look at it I see it as something even more,” Will sighed roughly, “maybe you would call it even more unbelievable but it wasn’t empathy it was...it was loneliness.

“He sought others who could see the world the way he did and he saw that love there. He was looking for understanding. People like to label him as they label any other psychopath, but isn’t it what we all look for in life? Someone who understands us and accepts us for what we are.”

It was on the third night that the redhead caught up with him again. Will had spent ninety percent of his time in his hotel room, going over notes, running programs for his research data from his uplink in Baltimore, phoning Hannibal, watching movies and having bad dreams. His cough had worsened to a throaty hoarseness; he’d started taking lozenges but knew he was ill. He thought a light quarantine was better than being a carrier. And it suited his mood.

The other ten percent of his time had been at lectures and going to the vending machines at three in the morning when no one else was around. And trying to ignore the gnawing thought:

He did it for you, he made them for you, he created works of art so he could watch you loathe them as much as you were fascinated by them.

It had been a chance fluke that, when he’d picked up the phone to put in his order for room service, the line was dead.

“Fucking hell,” he’d muttered as he clicked the receiver again and again; still no dial tone.

He’d contemplated phoning down on his mobile but the obtuseness of the action bit at him. *Just go downstairs for crying out loud*, he’d mocked himself. He tried to argue that it was better to rest, the illness was still riddling him, but he’d fought against that too.

So he had, walking on brown carpets through cream walls with oak doors passing him on either side of the elaborately long hallways like an illusion perception test. Will both hated large hotels for their labyrinthine nature, and loved them for the anonymity they offered. In a place as large as this, what were the chances of running into anyone you knew?

Which was why he'd felt betrayed by that love when, as he was sorting his phone problem and his dinner order at the front desk, muttering and refusing to look the concierge in the eye, a voice called out,

"Well isn't this a coincidence?"

Will looked up out of surprise, jittery, and swallowed the needles in his throat on seeing the same woman from before; short red hair, pale skin, only now wearing a green v-neck dress and high heels to match. For a moment Will just stared at her shoulder, before saying something that might have been 'hi' before finishing up with the concierge. The woman didn't leave. She waited until he was done and then started speaking to him as if it were her turn, following Will until they were near the small cluster of armchairs for waiting guests.

"I suppose most people from the conference are staying here, huh," she said, "are you headed to dinner?"

"In my room," Will qualified with a tight smile.

"Shame," she said, "I'd hoped to pick your brains a little more about the Chesapeake Ripper."

Will stalled. Swallowed. *He thought back to the question, that voice...*

"You, uh, asked me something at my lecture?" Will put forward even as he made to walk away back towards the elevators.

"Oh, you remember me?" she said with a smile; *not a nice smile*.

"Sure," he said vaguely, wanting to do nothing more than get back to his room.

"Do you?" she asked again harshly, stalling his movements, "Do you remember me?"

It was difficult, more difficult than anyone without his disorder could understand, but Will looked up and caught her stare, *red hair and oval face and pale skin and green eyes,* and his eidetic index flicked back through hundreds of faces until he froze on one. Hell, he thought, oh *hell*.

Remembering case notes and photographs and red roses, *the Ripper had used roses for Darcy, as if a love letter to her demise*, and sobbing relatives that Will had never met but had seen on news reports and in magazines and things he'd purposefully shielded himself from. Will flicked his eyes left and right before blinking, focusing back on her shoulder.

"You're Darcy Taylor's sister."

"You do remember," she said, sounding bright and confrontational; Will didn't want to do this here. He didn't want to do this *period*, "I suppose that gives you a few points over the rest of them."

"I really need to get back to my room," he said as he turned to leave.

"Don't you *dare* turn your back on me."

His heart jumped and he froze. Will knew why and he wished he could control it. The pain, he could hear it even though she hid it well, turned it into anger. Could feel it hit him, absorb through the skin. He sniffed, turning back to the woman who stood before him like a judge and saw the pain in her.

This is why I don't socialise he thought with desperate humour as he felt himself trapped in by it, *the guilt and the pain and the fear of it*.

"I didn't turn my back on you when I stood there and watched you tell a room of hundreds of people about the Chesapeake fucking Ripper's *emotional side*."

"I wasn't trying to..."

"I don't care what you were trying to do," she said, managing to keep her tone normal enough not to attract the attention of those in the wide, spacious lobby, "I care about what you do. What you all did or *didn't do*."

Keeping quiet was the only option, even as his nerves began to fry. He felt warm, a little dizzy with it. Apologise? His brain laughed. Apologise for not catching the maniac who murdered and mutilated her sister. What good does that do, Graham? What good does that do anyone?

"Did you come here to tell me this?" he asked, "Or to see what I had to say?"

"Both," she said bluntly.

"My thoughts aren't going to give you peace."

"Yeah? Well you know what would give me peace?" she said, her face twisting into an angry stare so intense he was unable to look away, "You keeping your goddamn thoughts to yourself. He killed my *sister*. And he's killed god knows how many other people's sisters and brothers and the last I ever heard of your so-called investigation was that you were close to something and then nothing. Nothing. *Nothing*."

The weight piled high, enough that Will could feel it resting squarely where she wished to put it; on his shoulders. *Why couldn't you catch him?* It asked. *He stopped killing before I got a chance to see him*, Will responded, *to know, I was so close but...*

...but you chose survival over justice. He was well aware of why he'd stopped hunting the Chesapeake Ripper, even if the man still lived in his world. To save himself from completing something he was sure he could never have come back from.

"It's not a closed case," he tried to console, "The FBI are still hunting him."

"And yet you're here, making money off a lecture where you espouse the doctrines of psychopaths. You know what? I think that everything they ever said about you is true. You're the one they should have in a fucking cell," her voice was hitching.

He felt like a fool, but yet couldn't stop himself from saying, "I'm sorry. I'm really sorry," because he was.

He really was.

“Not fucking good enough,” she said tearfully before leaning in and spitting squarely in his face.

Will recoiled but didn’t retaliate, eyes closing on instinct. Unable to see, he could hear her walk away, her heels clicking against the floor. For a few moments he didn’t breathe. When he finally let out the breath he was holding he found himself fumbling for the handkerchief Hannibal had insisted he take, folded meticulously in his jacket pocket. It seemed like a mere consolation but the soft silk smelled of Hannibal as he wiped the spit from his face.

Walking back to the concierge revealed, if the man’s discomfort was anything to go by, that he had seen everything. Will cancelled his room service. The bar let him buy a half bottle of rum to take back upstairs. Time became slow and sticky as he succumbed to a bout of contained desperation. The bottle was empty by the time he picked up the phone and messily dialled the familiar number.

He was good at taking it quick, just to get the ethanol into his blood stream. Had it down pat. They come in waves. As he got older he knew what it meant to drown. Urges like this do feel like water in the lungs. Whenever he closed his eyes it sat there with a welcoming smile. Sometimes, he smiled back.

There was no answer. He left a message.

“Where are you? I didn’t want to...” he stopped, trying to make sense, “maybe she’s right. Maybe I should be in a cage. You know that, though. You know what I am because you see me. Why didn’t you ever do anything about it? You let that Cheshire smile sleep next to you with the antlers in his mind, hooves running, running. You must’ve seen it in me, so why do you smile back?

“Sometimes I feel like...I’m fading. I don’t know if I did it right. But if everything that can happen happens, then you can never really do the wrong thing. You’re just...” the beeps rang out, signalling the end of the voicemail, “...doing what you’re supposed to.”

Will Graham curled up on top of the covers of his sterile hotel bed and fell fitfully to sleep, holding the phone close to his chest with arms curled to hold his heart in.

Ringing. It hurt. Will opened his eyes marginally, only a slit. Things were almost bright.

Did I fall asleep with the lamp on?

Ringing. He unfurled slowly. He felt the ringing in his hand, *right hand or left hand?* His arms ached, muscles tired from hours twisted in too tightly. His skin prickled.

Ringing. By the time he managed to answer the ringing stopped. Will stared blearily at the screen, showing a missed call. When there was a knock at the door he looked at it as if it

were taunting him.

Getting up was torturous; he felt cold from not being under the sheets and yet simultaneously hot under the skin. His head felt axe-split from temple to temple. Walking was disorienting. When he reached out for the door to turn the lock it opened before he had the chance. Standing up too quickly caused him to stumble, catching himself against the wall with clammy hands.

They stared at each other through the open door.

“What’re you doing here?” Will asked tiredly.

“I would have thought it was obvious,” Hannibal replied.

“If it was obvious I wouldn’t have asked,” he said, leaning his head against the wall; it was cool, he needed that. His skin felt warm, hot, “what are you smiling at?”

“I would have thought *that* was obvious,” Hannibal said as he closed the door behind him, put his small luggage carriers down in the corner, and then gathered Will into his arms; there was a pause, in which Will allowed himself the luxury. Hannibal pulled back and lifted the scent from the air, sniffing. A hand was placed against Will’s forehead, “you are feverish. How long have you been unwell?”

Laughter was definitely not the answer Hannibal had wanted; the stony glance told him everything he wanted to know.

“Since I was born,” he laughed, coughing roughly, wetly, “thought you’d noticed,” he laughed again, “you brought two bags.”

“Hardly the time for trite observations,” Hannibal said as he led Will to the bed and sat him down.

“Are there two pairs of socks in there, two toothbrushes?”

“I am going to undress you.”

And he did, meticulously and efficiently. Will didn’t help, constantly shaking, muttering and slumping to the side. By the time he was naked he lay shivering on the sheets, curled in foetus-like. Hannibal hunkered down by the bed and observed him, asking him gently to open his eyes, checking his pulse and smoothing his hair back from his forehead. When he pulled the sheets up across him Will shook his head.

“Please don’t.”

“Do not fight me, Will. There is a twenty four hour pharmacy nearby. I have put water on the bedside table. Try to drink. I will be back soon.”

Even through the haze of flu-fog Will recognised the anomaly. Hannibal hardly ever called him by his given name; *darling or dearest*, but Will only when Hannibal was to be taken seriously. He lay there, in the gloom, and tried to understand who he was.

Will Graham, darling, dearest, his father's pup, his mother's abandonment.

The Ripper's love letter.

He didn't think he was asleep. He did remember hearing music, a warm melody to match the warmth of the room, the warmth of the thin sheet, the warmth of the unspoken animosity in the air.

Excuse me

He sniffed, blinking his eyes. The world shuttered in and out of focus.

Excuse me, can you help?

When it finally cleared, Will looked up from the edge of the bed to find two large, black eyes staring down at him.

It was big. Bigger than he'd expected. Then he had to ask himself, *why did you expect it?* Somehow, in this warm, comfortable air the question seemed irrelevant. Instead the large, black stag sitting down on its hind legs in the middle of his hotel room seemed utterly logical. Its impressive antlers racked up towards the ceiling, so much so that it seemed to stoop down in order to stop them from becoming tangled in the light fitting.

"Did you ask me a question?" Will murmured sleepily.

I seem to have lost something, it said.

"Oh?" Will said, trying to think of what his dad always asked him when he lost things, "Where did you leave it last?"

Right here, the stag nodded its great head down, making the antlers rattle like caged bones, *and now I can't find it. There should be two, but now there is only one.*

The air swam with gloom, but for the crackling of the fire in the grate against the far wall. The warmth cuddled their forms, cocooning them. Sparks bobbed about, floating like stars through the smoky nebulous clouds. On the floor between them sat a small table hosting a bowl of dead flowers, heads drooping like tired old men.

There was a wonderful normalcy to the fantasy of it all, like a vilified escape. It swamped him happily.

"Do you miss it?" Will asked, the sound of a clock ringing out from another room in the background.

I don't know, the stag said, bristling its feather-fur as a raven might do; the firelight from behind made it seem larger than it was, or perhaps it was larger than it was, which made Will realise he didn't know how large anything might be and he felt suddenly small.

"You don't know?" he asked.

I don't think I ever knew it to begin with, the stag asked dolefully, *surely better to have never known and lost, than to know and lose it all.*

As he woke the feeling of displacement and unreality followed him. His eyes blinked open and he became aware that his head was moving. Then it stopped. Then a set of fingers appeared in his hair and dragged through carefully. When he found the wherewithal to look up he found Hannibal above him reading a book, and then managed to centre himself; *his head upon a warm lap, cradled*. He cleared his throat and looked left, half expecting to see black eyes staring back at him. Instead he found a clean, painted wall, *no grate, no fire, no table, no flowers, no stag.*

"Did I wake you?" Hannibal asked.

"No, I mean...I don't know," Will licked his lips and closed his eyes as the fingers caressed his scalp; his voice was quiet and weak. He wasn't sure how to remedy it.

"You were talking," Hannibal said as he put his book down with his left hand, "how do you feel?"

"I was dreaming," Will murmured, as if he could still feel it clinging to him; there was a sense of loss there, that he'd never found out what had been misplaced by the...what was it? Already the particulars of the dream were fading, until only feeling was left. The world seemed foggy and distant, "What did I say?"

"You asked a question. 'Do you miss it'," Hannibal looked down at him and caught his eye, "would you sit up for me, darling? I have medicine I would like you to take."

He did as he was told. Two pills: the thought made him shake his head. *Doubles, doubles, doubles*. Naproxen, washed down with Acetaminophen. They went down with difficulty past his inflamed throat. He gagged on the first, choking it out onto the floor. Hannibal was patient with him, as always. Will felt as if he were beneath the watchful eyes of a large cat; *was it patience or apathy? Was it love or loneliness?*

Will spoke without the ability to think about why it might be a problem, "I had a twin, did you know?"

Lying down as he was he couldn't see Hannibal, but Will could feel him, feel his hesitation. Less a worried hesitation and more a hesitation that spoke of being caught out. The silence was all the more obvious for the fact that Hannibal was rarely without words. Will rolled onto his back, slowly, agonisingly, the sheet twisting around him, constricting. From his expression, seen from below like a small child might, Hannibal appeared alert and interested, as well as hesitant and wary.

"You never spoke of a sibling," Hannibal said eventually.

"No, no I'm an only child."

"You are incoherent, darling. It's best that you sleep."

“I’m fine,” Will reached up and blearily rubbed his eyes with his left hand, “it wasn’t...sorry, I’m not fine. I don’t know why I brought it up.”

You do know, his conscience mocked.

There was a silence. Will focused on breathing in and out; *in, out*. The aching in his body was matched by his mind’s stiffness. His mouth and his subconscious seemed to have formed an alliance without his knowledge. He cleared his throat again and winced, coughing. Still he took his opportunity. He knew that Hannibal’s silences were always an opportunity.

“I did, have a twin that is,” he started, “but only one of us made it out alive,” the silence lingered invitingly, “I swallowed him whole, in utero. Guess I was a survivor even before I was born.”

Bright eyes watched him closely, and when Hannibal spoke it was difficult to tell where he was, “What brought this on?”

“...lots of things, I guess. Do I have to pick one?”

“Why pick just one?” Hannibal smiled, “I am sure they are all utterly entertaining.”

“Did you know Darcy Taylor’s sister was at my lecture?” Will saw Hannibal cock his head, his smile never leaving his face, “Hmm, no, how would you know that,” Will muttered, “she was. She asked me, she found me and asked me how I could claim that the monster had feelings.”

“She was upset?”

“She was angry,” Will said, “and upset. I don’t blame her for it.”

“For what, dearest?”

“Spitting in my face. I think it was mild compared to what she really wanted,” when Will looked up Hannibal was still, very still like a picture of a man rather than a living, breathing human being, “I think she saw the...the monster on my skin.”

“Only monsters can see other monsters. And only the presumptuous and the arrogant can presume to label them as such. If we were to be honest with each other perhaps we could say we see each other clearly, and yet all this time and I never knew I was living with a chimera.”

“A real monster,” Will tried to grin but it failed as he held up two fingers and wriggled them wearily, “Two sets of DNA. It depends where they take the sample from. I didn’t know until I had to have blood tests for my anaemia in high school. It’s odd, isn’t it?”

“What is?” he was asked as Hannibal wiped at his brow with a damp cloth. Droplets of water trickled down into his hair.

“That I’ve never really thought about it? I never really thought about having a brother or a sister. I mean I knew that other kids did, but I didn’t. Then it turns out that I’m carrying my brother with me; always have been.”

The silence had changed. At first he couldn't tell if it was for the better or the worse. Hannibal's hand continued its rhythmic caress, but Will thought he could feel the minute change in tension in the thighs beneath his head, the slight aberrances to Hannibal's steady breathing. The room seemed less the warm cocoon of the dream and now some sort of other world; a reality not wanting to be touched.

"Darcy's sister, she'll never come to terms with her death. She'll never see the other side of it because she doesn't want to. And I...I never had the brother I ate before my mouth even knew food. And you..."

A pause. The room seemed close and momentarily on the edge of terrifying.

"Why do you never talk about Mischa?" Will asked before he lost the nerve to.

A soft sigh was all he was met with, and a tipped head as Hannibal pursed his lips and narrowed his eyes. It had been what seemed an age since Will had learned of the name. *Mishca Lecter.* Not from conversation, nothing so concrete. It had been a photograph, sitting on a mantelpiece in the vastness of the Lecter estate like a hidden lie.

On their first ever visit to Hannibal's aunt and uncle's, when they had announced their engagement, Will had been given time to himself. Half because Hannibal had wanted time with his family, and half because Hannibal's aunt had wanted to spend time with her nephew. It had turned out there were lots of rooms to explore in order to get away from the myriad of servants, gauche wealth and prying eyes.

Somehow he'd ended up in the East wing, which appeared mainly untouched. Long corridors and bright daylight hidden behind heavy curtains. He had wandered at will like an intrepid explorer, waiting for someone to turn up and find him. Or maybe stop him. Instead he found himself in a room that seemed like a mishmash of many things, disused furniture half covered by dust sheets, sturdy cardboard boxes half open and labelled on yellowed card.

And on the mantelpiece above the clean fireplace, sat three framed photographs. In each Will had clearly recognised Hannibal, shown in different stages of life. Will had gathered them up and taken them with him, feeling like a thief. It had been in a bid to know more, a need to feel connected, to prove to Hannibal that there was reason in the madness of their relationship.

When he had shown them to Hannibal later that evening the man had looked mildly surprised, but obliged nonetheless.

"This is myself and my aunt," he had said when Will had silently prompted him to tell by handing the frames over as they sat together on the bed, "in France, where I grew up. We have a villa there, in a little town called Gigaro. It is a beautiful place. I should take you, it holds many fond memories for me. I must have been fourteen here, yes fourteen. I recognise the kimono she is wearing, you see the doves stitched into the hem?"

Will nodded, sliding in when Hannibal put his arm around his shoulders and gently pulled him close.

“And this,” he said picking up the second, “this is my graduation from Lycée, before I moved to Baltimore.”

“So young,” Will commented.

“I attended when I was just thirteen. It was a beautiful time, so much activity, so much ambition. Yet sometimes not so free as I would have liked. There was a most persistent policeman who harassed me then, not that I remember his name. And this,” Hannibal picked up the last slowly, carefully, as if it were a timid creature that might bolt from the scrutiny, “my, I must be no more than three.”

“It’s good to know you always looked so serious,” Will said with a small smile, “but who’s this?” he’d asked, pointing carefully to the young child beside Lecter, chubby faced and smiling in a white toddlers lace dress.

Hannibal sniffed, twitching his upper lip in a familiar expression that only afflicted him when he was unwilling. Will was tempted to take the words back, swallow them up, but then:

“My sister,” he’d said, surprising Will; when they’d first spoken of family Lecter had said he was an orphan and no siblings had been mentioned, “Mischa.”

“Oh,” was all he could think to say, struggling not to blunder he continued, “she looks like you.”

“Yes,” Hannibal smiled softly, “we were very much alike, in a lot of ways. She died young.”

“Sorry, I shouldn’t have brought these...”

“It’s perfectly alright. She is always with me, so I do not have to miss her. Come, we should dress for dinner. My uncle is a stickler for timekeeping.”

And that had been that. Will wasn’t foolish enough to press when the subject seemed so prickly. Yet now he felt the veils had been lifting from them, one by one they had slowly allowed each other to reach out and pull the shrouds down, or simply remove them without prompting. Now Will felt that they were in a position to explain themselves. In a place occupied by only they two.

Again the familiar twitch hitched Hannibal’s features, *lip pulled up as his nose wrinkled*, and he once more ran his hand through Will’s hair with exceptional tenderness. Will could feel the dampness against fingertips, as if pulling at threads in his mind.

“It is not an enjoyable memory,” he said with unusual bluntness, “and sometimes I do not feel qualified to...shall we say that there are still certain things that I do not feel qualified to accept the reality of.”

“I think I understand. Sometimes I barely feel qualified to live in the same house as another human being. God knows how I made it this far. I mean I’ve been so preoccupied for most of my adult career with taking life that I’m having trouble wrapping my head around making one.”

“When men become fathers, they undergo biochemical changes that affect the way they think.”

“Funny,” Will said, taking a deep breath; he lingered that way for a while, mind floating. Eventually he returned, “a professor once said the same thing to me of killers.”

“Fatherhood is not always a nurturing role. Fathers can be killers. In protecting a child, things trapped inside a man for years fly free, ready to explode in pain. And dangerous behaviour,” Hannibal looked down to him once more, “what sort of father will you be?”

He’d thought it would take more consideration, but in the end Will felt confident when he said,

“I’ll be a good father.”

A warm smile was his reply.

“I imagine you will. Yet how quickly we form attachments to something that does not yet exist.”

“I’m not attached,” Will shrugged, rubbing his chill fingers together; it seemed so very odd to find they were not cold at all, but hot, “just...anticipating attachment. Sometimes I used to imagine what it would be like to have had a sibling but it never stuck. It never sat right. This is different.”

“We have a deep-seated need to interact with our children. It helps us discover who we are.”

An odd thought swam into his mind and his feverish mind had no problem with asking, “Have you ever been a father?”

“I suppose you could brand me with the title. I was a father to my sister. She wasn’t my child, but she was my charge. But cruelty has a way of slicing through happiness, and she was taken from me. Time flows only in one direction and yet...occasionally, on purpose, I drop a teacup to shatter on the floor,” Hannibal sighed as Will watched him, observed his melancholy and knew it as an old pain, a pain that had been lived with for many years, absorbed, assimilated, “I’m not satisfied when it doesn’t gather itself up again. Someday, perhaps a cup will come together.”

“Soon,” Will said, finding Hannibal’s hand with his own and grasping it tightly; Hannibal watched him, “perhaps soon, we’ll both turn time back to when we were whole.”

Hannibal watched him, his face utterly passive except for his eyes; intense and vivid. Will licked his lips and took a breath and coughed, unable to stop. His body shook until he rolled onto his side while Hannibal rubbed gently at his back. He found himself staring at the foot of the bed, at the rumpled bed sheets and Hannibal’s legs ending in his socked feet.

“And if your sister lives within you,” he said slowly, “and my brother within me, perhaps there would be something of them both in our child. May be that the universe shall contract

and time reverse and teacups come back together again. A place in our world for all the things that should never have been lost."

"Darling," Hannibal said, so quietly that Will almost missed it; fingers cupped his face and caressed his cheek, "perhaps. Perhaps."

It was as they lay there, twined in body and in thoughts, that Will reached up with an unsteady hand and rubbed his fingers against Hannibal's trouser leg. His husband frowned as he continued his rhythmic stroke across Will's slick skin. Then;

"You're wearing that fucking suit," Will said, as if amazed.

Hannibal's laughter followed, though its true meaning was known only to him.

Sex/Science/Truth

Chapter Summary

> “Brave and yet fearful. You are a stunning paradox. I think you are very capable, you would simply fear it. I do not want you to fear me, Will.”
>
> “Then don’t ask me to...” Will swallowed, sitting up; a tugging in his gut that had pulled him here, over dark roads and open limbs and corpses fresh from the Ripper’s graveyard, he’d crawled here like a stray dog unsure whether to bite the hand that fed it.

Chapter Notes

> This chapter is out of the timeline, flashing back to Will and Hannibal's fateful first night together (as mentioned in chapter 8 of 'Il Faut Souffrir Pour Être Beau'). I thought it would be interesting to look at the reasoning (or lack thereof) behind Will's loss of his initial suspicion of Hannibal as the CR, which is something I never fully explored in the story.
> Also, smut.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“You’re staring again.”

“It’s not staring. It’s concentrated dislike.”

There were two feet between them but he and Beverly stood together, mirrored against the wall; both slouched, arms folded, staring. They stared separately. Beverly at the chromatograph as its needle swung up and down in its long, metal tubing. Will at the man currently in amiable and yet intense discussion with their section head.

“I think you should call it what it is. It’s concentra*ting*. You’ve been doing that a lot recently. On him.”

“Makes himself difficult to ignore. How much longer?” he asked, tipping his head to the complex machine separating out the contents of the gas found on their charred victim, currently lying on a mortuary slab two floors down.

“About...” Beverly leaned forwards to get an angle on the digital readout, “fifteen minutes. That’s fifteen more minutes of watching time for you, before you have to actually talk to him.”

“I’m not talking to him.”

“Oh,” Beverly smiled subtly, as if laughing at her own joke, “have a domestic did you?”

“Can’t have a domestic if you’re not *domestic*,” Will countered a little too quickly; he hated that Beverly waited. She was too good at waiting. Patience of a saint. Eventually Will sighed, looking away as he scratched at his stubbled jaw, “he won’t stop asking me to dinner.”

“Maybe you should go then.”

“And what? Spend the entire night telling him why he’s everything that’s wrong with society and *then* tell him why I’m so sick fed up having to explain the same fucking thing over and over again? I don’t think that goes well with appetisers.”

“Or you could, I don’t know, talk to him like a human being. Just a suggestion.”

“He’s not a human being,” Will said, levelling his gaze at that immaculate back hidden beneath a forest green suit, and beneath that... “he’s a sphinx. And I’m not getting into riddles. It’s a slope I don’t want to slide down.”

“Maybe he just thinks you’re hot,” Beverly shrugged, smiling slyly.

“He can think whatever he wants,” Will said, looking away quickly as Lecter turned towards him.

His heart had skipped up and over itself. His skin itched to return its stare to where it had been and see, see if he *knew.* Only it was too mawkish. Worrying. Will could tell that wasn’t confined to him alone; it was difficult for Beverly to hide the amusement in her eyes as they laughed at him. Only it was more difficult to swallow when it was laced with pity.

Pity was the last thing he needed. Mainly because it was also on his list of things about society that he just fucking didn’t need. Not that anyone really understood that. Not really. Even friends, those who he could call friends even if it wasn’t how others might think of friends, still gave him commiserating stares when it seemed he had lost out on an opportunity to be happy with someone.

To be where they thought he should be.

“You’re pathetic, you know that right?” Beverly said, smirking.

“If I didn’t, then I do now,” Will said, hating that he was sure Hannibal had caught him in his *focused dislike* which was an awful lot like *concentrated staring*.

God he hated Hannibal fucking Lecter. Hated his fucking aristocratic, ivy league educated speech and his bespoke outfits and his charm and his stupid, immaculately parted hair. He hated that the man didn’t do what others did, didn’t pander to Will’s status or go through the tired motions of courtship or try and purposefully impress him or fight Jack for control or actually *fight* Jack in order to impress him (it had happened, once).

He was just *there*, being perfectly likable in a conceited sort of way. It was something Will thought he could have dealt with if Lecter would just leave him alone. Or if Will could make his thoughts leave Lecter alone.

This would all be so much easier, Will thought as the two men approached, *if he wasn't so damn interesting.*

"So, what have you got for me Katz?" Jack asked, his pock marked face alight with the praise Lecter had surely been plying him with; it appeared to be Lecter's ploy in that department.

"Nearly ready Chief," Beverly said, "couple more minutes."

"Perhaps Will has something he would like to add?" Lecter said, looking at him suddenly.

"Not particularly," Will said, deadpan.

"Oh? I thought you were trying to catch my attention. My mistake."

"Don't worry," Will said, pushing up from the wall to walk off, "you'll get used to it."

And he'd allowed himself the rest of the day, congratulating himself on his witty comeback...before realising it had been pretty petty considering he'd been staring at the man like he might be about to steal something and he'd probably just said it to be courteous, considering how anachronistically gentlemanly he could be and, fuck...

...he'd texted Lecter an apology. Standing in his house, in the middle of nowhere, in the darkness of a winter night, Will stared at the words '*message sent'* and wondered where his resolve had gone.

Four weeks later

At first he couldn't tell what the problem was. There were so many to choose from. Should he pick the chill of the upper rooms that made him uncomfortable? The fact that he didn't seem to be able to draw in enough air? Maybe the fact that he could barely stand without support? But then he wasn't sure if that was more to blame on his biological state or the fear. There was anxiety and apprehension, and then there was the fear, definitely the fear. It beat in his heart, which was doing a triple time rhythm.

His biological state, that being one of whom was currently undergoing sensory overload. The suppressants were gone, like a veil being lifted. He was a blind man able to see the world again. A deaf man able to hear music playing. A mute man shouting for joy in the streets. *All the world was his playground, and Will Graham was hiding, terrified, down under all that stimulus*.

The one that kept him upright was also his greatest challenge. They walked together, like a chimera, all twisted limbs hanging onto each other. When Will thought about it later, *at the time he had no ability to think*, he would realise that Hannibal had not let go of him since he

had found him in the library. Always a hand on his body somewhere, fingers around a wrist, arms circling shoulders, back, the side of a cheek against his neck.

Lips. Lips against his clothing. His skin.

Eyes. Eyes on him. They might as well have been touches.

How had this happened? It was a joke. A pretend. A Make Believe. For such a long time he'd tried to imagine that the taciturn attention Dr. Lecter paid him was a play. A play he would use to hound the younger, less experienced social hermit for his own amusement. Wasn't that why others did it? Paid attention to him to make him uncomfortable. To watch him squirm and see all those nasty *differences* pop up like welts on his skin.

Let's see you speak in public out of your lecture theatre, Graham.

Let's see you deal with crowds, Graham.

Let's see you catch someone's eye, Graham.

Let's see you function without the suppressants, Omega.

So maybe it had been instinctual, to hate him. Hating him was easy because Hannibal made himself so easy to dislike. The rich, social alpha with his easy charm, his money and his education. His simple beauty. Sometimes Will had gone as far as to force himself to believe Hannibal mocked him with his mere existence. A carven monument to his unglazed clay pot, one which shone out all the brighter for the comparison.

Then he had forced himself to realise that if he added one more adjective or metaphor to the list he used for Dr. Lecter, he would have to start admitting more worrying things to himself: like how much time he spent coming up with said metaphors and adjectives. *Try and wiggle out of that*, his conscience would supply when Lecter would attend a coroner's report, the blue nitrile gloves seeming out of place muddled in with his immaculate ensemble of paisley and tartan and navy blue as he spoke of laquer and agonal changes and the subtle panoply of petechial haemorrhageing on pale, dead skin.

He had paid too much attention, far too much attention to a man who he disliked with such a passion. It was a slippery slope to acceptance, greased by many things: Hannibal performing life saving surgery upon him. Hannibal never paying a blind bit of attention to Will's standoffishness or his bluntness. Even his rudeness, which seemed to be a first for Lecter considering what Will had seen of the man's other interactions (rudeness seemed to be the eighth deadly sin). Hannibal never being tetchy or aggressive or annoyed at Will. Hannibal having a dry, dark sense of humour. They all counted as the *grease*.

Of course Will stopping his suppressants was the main contributor. If he was to be fair, Will knew that he could have held out against Lecter until the end of time if he would have only stayed on the Antryphodene. Instead, for the sake of the case, he had been off them for a full twenty four hours, enough for them to be utterly out of his system.

Enough for him to be drowning in scent and sight and sound and ready to *scream it all*.

And it had been sudden. It seemed too sudden to be real. He'd known as soon as he stepped into the house that it had been a mistake; *wits left on the doorstep as he allowed his senses to act for him, telling him everything he'd been missing all this time*. He'd come because of Olmstead, but now he'd stayed because of Hannibal. Now it was real because of Hannibal Lecter.

Maybe it wasn't, he told himself as he was walked backwards into the room. *Maybe it was all a fantasy?* Only the hands at his elbows were real, holding him tightly to keep him steady. And the expensive cotton beneath his hands was real, as he gripped Lecter's biceps to keep his hands from shaking. And where their hips pressed together and their chests pressed together and their thighs brushed *were* real. And the breath at his throat was real, as Lecter spoke softly; calming words, gentle.

'...and you take such time, don't you Will. Such time. So graceful, I don't know how I missed it. Have you always been so very shy? I admit I thought you were more of a blunt instrument. Would you look me in the eye and tell me what you want? Would you..?'

It seemed rude not to. Didn't it? Spikes of intuitive charge, rushing though his system. *Shock, shock, sizzle, beat*. Every time that hot breath clouded against his clavicle Will shook, hands gripping tighter. *Is this what it's like to need?* For a long moment they stood, still and together, entwined in the low light. When he tried to look around himself Will realised his eyes were slightly out of focus.

"Where?" he cleared his throat, blinking, "I don't know where this is."

"Safe," Lecter replied, still *hot wet breath against his ear and Will couldn't think and wouldn't if he hadn't been so damn high on the smell and the touch and the taste, god the taste...*

"Could you stop that?" he took a sharp breath then let it out, long and slow against the white clad shoulder before his mouth.

"What would you like me to stop?"

"You..." Will closed his eyes and hummed distractedly as one of the hands moved from his elbow to his right hip, finding a natural handhold across the bone, fingers tracing in between his waistband and his shirt, "you know what I mean. I...is it just..? I don't know," Will laughed but it didn't last, shaking his head, "I don't know. You're very distracting."

"What am I distracting you from?" the mouth asked as the *hot wet breath* moved down from ear to the soft part of his neck behind his jaw, never touching, only waiting. They swayed together, although Will thought that maybe he swayed first and Hannibal simply compensated for the movement. It pulled them marginally closer.

"Nothing in particular...just, *everything*."

"Everything and nothing," the lips said; they sounded like they were smiling, "how apt."

“I don’t...know,” Will took another deep breath, held on tight and then let it loose, “you really need to, I mean could you just put..?” somehow he managed to unfurl his right first, pull the claws out of the cloth it clutched and shakily cradle the well trimmed nape of Lecter’s neck. It didn’t take much to pull him close, closer, *close enough to that hot, wet breath* to feel it followed by the lips that spoke.

Then the lips that spoke were against his throat. Will realised he’d had his eyes closed for longer than he’d meant to, but it was so difficult to open them again. The nerves at his throat were singing some obscure, unknown song. Will realised he might be breathing too hard, caressing that well trimmed nape just a little too wildly while those lips carved ecstasy onto his skin. When they stopped all Will could think is that this hadn’t done anything for his calm at all. He felt dizzy and his legs were weak.

“I might need to,” he raised his eyebrows and shivered, “I think I might need to lie down.”

“Of course.”

“Uh huh.”

It turned out that the bed wasn’t far because the unknown place he had been taken to was the bedroom. A convenient place to be steered, one which Will wasn’t sure should make him happy or furious. Right now it made him *relieved*, but later he would be able to decide on the whole happy/furious angle.

Sunken down into an ivory duvet, plumped up around him like a marshmallow, Will lifted his shaking hands and rubbed them down over his face then back up over his eyes. The sound of frustration that leaked from his throat wasn’t entirely genuine, but he hoped it masked the embarrassment he didn’t want to voice. This was unfamiliar, in more ways than one. And unfair, it was very unfair. He hadn’t felt desire this all encompassing since he was sixteen years old and that was, what? He was thirty five, just shy of thirty six. So it was nearly a good, solid two decades without ever thinking of *this*. Of offering himself to someone else and telling himself that was ok.

Only now it wasn’t about overcoming his fears of physical contact and intimacy and trust and virginity and just being with someone else. It was trying to survive the hectic, drowning sensation that his hormones were swamping him in. And all, in turn, fighting with the intuition that had brought him here, led him towards the front door of Lecter’s up-town-house like Theseus following the thread.

Only this thread had led him to the beast, not away from it. *Am I here to slay you?* he asked himself, staying perfectly still, *Or be caught. I think I’m caught. Maybe have been for longer than I wanted to be.* The thought was chilling. Made the hairs stand up on his bare forearms.

Don’t be a fool, Graham, he told himself sternly, *don’t be the guy who cuts out his eyes to spite his brain.* He’d been wrong before. He had. This wasn’t something he’d thought was certain, he just...needed to know.

“I’m not sure if I can, um, stay,” Will pulled his hands down and laid them on his chest, looking down to the foot of the bed and losing his words altogether.

Lecter looked back at him, vermilion tie in his hands freshly removed from a now empty collar, first button undone on his shirt. The tie was quickly and efficiently folded in half, then again, and placed on the long, low cabinet behind him.

“I wouldn’t dream of stopping you,” Lecter said casually as he continued to unbutton his shirt.

“Stopping me what?” Will asked, voice almost a whisper, brow furrowed in confusion.

“From leaving, if you wish to.”

“Right,” Will licked his lips and looked up at the ceiling, listening to the steady, wild pulse of his body, “of course. Uh huh. I’d rather,” *are you crazy?* he wanted to shout at himself, *are you insane or are you just weak?*, “you just come back here.”

“There?” Hannibal asked, gesturing to the bed as she shrugged out of his shirt and began folding it just as neatly.

“Here,” Will nodded, eyes once more trained on the new revelation, like an unwrapped gift.

Dark chest hair, sprinkled with grey. It was obvious his body had once been stunningly athletic, whipcord muscles beneath silk. Now age had deteriorated it, giving way to more girth around the middle, a slight stretchiness to the muscles as they played across his arms, a slackness to the skin. Will couldn’t have cared less. It was as if he were staring at the sun, so bright it was painful to look at.

His hands were now twisted tightly together as he watched Lecter undo the button, then the zip and then take his trousers and his briefs down with one, slick movement as he folder from the waist. The bending rumpled the weight at his belly, but Will found himself distracted by the revelation of long, powerful legs. And, when he stood up, the black run of hair down beneath his naval leading to the nestle of curls between his thighs.

Clearing his throat didn’t help the fact that he could neither comment nor breathe correctly; kept sticking in his throat. He tried to go for long and thin inhales and exhales through his nose, while in his head all he could clinically think was: *I’ve never actually seen one in real life. Well, not on a living person and that’s odd, isn’t it? That’s odd, Graham, you’re an odd person.* Somehow it seemed embarrassing, even though he hadn’t admitted it to anyone but himself. Lecter’s penis was long and thick, slightly flushed along the length as it stood semi-erect, as if propped up from between toned thighs by the heavy knot at its base. The shape wasn’t unfamiliar, he’d seen textbook diagrams, biological studies that had included the alpha reproductive system. He had even seen corpses naked as the pathologist exposited their theories.

To say that this was different seemed utterly redundant, yet his scrambled mind wouldn’t allow for anything more. It was different because he was being made different by it. The sight alone made him blink rapidly and his nostrils flare subconsciously in order to pick up the scent, that wild scent which seemed to effuse now that genitalia were suddenly involved.

Sudden genitalia, his brain decided to offer in a hysterical distraction, *great name for a rock band.* There was a need to laugh, one which Will quickly lifted his tightly clasped hands to stifle because he couldn't *laugh*, not now, he couldn't let the man undress before him and then *laugh* in his face. And then there was a sound of feet walking and the mattress dipped to his right and suddenly the full length of physical desire was laying down next to him on its back.

For a while they lay there, together, both staring at the ceiling: Hannibal with his hands resting upon his abdomen, Will with his still clasped at his mouth. Another crazy, aborted laugh shook his frame and he closed his eyes again. *Breathe*, he told himself, *don't forget to breathe.* Bringing his hands down was a slow process, one which trusted that he wouldn't laugh again.

"I thought..." Will started, then thought: *you can't tell him this*, and then was forced to change his mind when maroon eyes clicked to him, "you know I thought I hated you, for a long time."

"We have only known each other three months."

"Seems longer."

"Hate is a swift emotion. It likes biting first, consequences later. What is it that you hate?"

"I don't," Will swallowed, licking his lips, "I never...I don't hate you. It was...it wasn't important. Did you?"

"Hate you? I have never hated you."

"Despised me? Ridiculed me? Pitied me?" Will asked, feeling liberated on asking, yet fearing the answer.

"No, on all counts. I have been curious about you. Does that constitute more of an attachment than hate?"

"I never hated you," Will reiterated, feeling annoyed that he'd brought it up at all.

When the silence drew on Will thought he could hear the soft voice and could already feel the *hot wet breath* at his ear again, even if there was a good two feet between them.

"It is no good," Hannibal said, sniffing; Will looked to him from the corner of his eye, frowning, "it is necessary for you to suffer through exposure. Something tells me it is the only truth I might get out of you. So I think it would be beneficial if you were to follow my example."

"Your example," Will said, deadpan.

Another smothered laugh. *Follow my example*. This was *insane.* It was one mad thing to watch the man who had haunted his thoughts for months now suddenly strip before his eyes with no warning, but...

“I can’t,” he said, unable to hide the laugh this time because he felt so nervous that he thought he might hyperventilate if he didn’t and that couldn’t be attractive, could it? “I really...can’t. Not with you looking.”

“Well, if I do not look it defeats the purpose.”

“I don’t do audiences.”

“I did not know one person constituted an audience.”

“Semantics. Please don’t get into semantics. I can’t.”

“On this we disagree. You are more than capable.”

“What would...”

“Brave and yet fearful. You are a stunning paradox. I think you are very capable, you would simply fear it. I do not want you to fear me, Will.”

“Then don’t ask me to...” Will swallowed, sitting up; *a tugging in his gut that had pulled him here, over dark roads and open limbs and corpses fresh from the Ripper’s graveyard, he’d crawled here like a stray dog unsure whether to bite the hand that fed it.*

From here he could look down to his right and see those long, powerful legs, thighs, the tip of that flushed cock that seemed to embody the need in him, “*Jesus*,” he whispered, “this is crazy. I need to go. I’m going, ok?”

Then he was standing at the foot of the bed, looking down at the discarded clothes there, *briefs and trousers and socks*, and for a moment he was amazed. The revelation stopped him: that Hannibal had managed to leave them crumpled in a pile there. Such control, Will knew Hannibal suffered from it. Acute OCD, it was everywhere in the man’s life, *earlier*, *in the library where they had kissed, Will had studied the man’s compulsive disorder in the sight of paper set to exact degrees in line with the edges of desks, items spaced at level intervals that could probably be measured with a ruler*.

He had watched the man purposefully move things that others had put down until they were exactly where he needed them to be. Had watched him suppress the need to fidget when someone put a dirty tissue on his table, or put a glass down without a coaster, or not take their shoes off at the door. Lecter’s need to control his environment was matched only by his need to control himself.

Enough that the sight of the disorder at his feet only jumbled Will’s resolve.

Is it that important? He wanted to ask, turn and blurt out. *Why is this so important to you?* A foolish question, one that made him feel trapped. Feel those eyes boring into his back as he stood facing the wall. Standing there at the foot of the bed, staring down at the rumple of material that caused the wings of chaos to spin a hurricane.

The first button was the hardest simply because his fingers had been so tightly wound together for so long that they were stiff and bloodless. It made the first button take longer

than he'd hoped, *get it done, get it out of the way and then you won't have to worry any more.* The second was easier, then the third. Taking it off was harder. Reaching down to take hold of the hem with both hands and lift was something he knew he'd never have been able to do were it not for *that scent* and the *those clothes* and *that chaos.*

His Henley shirt was dropped into the mounting pile on the floor. Will only became aware that he was shaking when he drew a breath, listened to it stutter in and out. Shaking hands undid his jeans, noting they were still wet from the rain at the hem on each foot and it had soaked into his socks. A hesitation, a deep breath and then a pull, bending at the waist and rushing out of his socks as he took off each leg, one after the other from the knee. When he stood and turned, he couldn't help but fold his arms across his abdomen loosely.

Maroon watched him, trailed its colour across him slowly. He couldn't help but wet his lips. The soft, low light cast Hannibal in an almost sombre state like some ancient burial, trapped in between the duvet, hands upon his abdomen, shadows sharp on his face; as if candles might be burning somewhere. The perfuming scent was venomous, sinking into his lungs and poisoning him.

"Will?"

"Just...dizzy."

"Lie down with me."

He nodded, switching to breathing through his mouth, soft and long and low. He climbed onto the bed right knee first, then arching forwards onto all fours and crawling up, back to his original spot. Once more they lay together. Nothing in the air but breathing, enough that it made Will self conscious. He curbed his agitated breaths, trying to calm down. The silence was difficult to bear, mainly because it left his mind time to do the dirty work: *what's wrong, have I done something wrong? Doesn't he know I don't know what the fuck I'm doing? He must know, this is really...*

"I've never," Will stopped, licked at his teeth and then continued, glancing to his right, "done this before."

"I see," again Hannibal retained his casualness, enviably so, "How long have you been on the Antryphodene?"

"Uh, about nineteen years. Nearly twenty."

"Non-stop?"

"Yeah."

"You're lucky. Most suffer some form of long-term side effect by year ten."

"I get bad allergic reactions," Will said, feeling stupid for bringing it up, "sometimes. Not sure what to, and I never used to get them, just..." he cleared his throat and shook his head, face breaking into a rictus smile, "*wow*, why am I telling you this?"

“Would you rather talk about something else?”

“I don’t know,” *you never answered my question, you never answered me, you should answer me whether you treated Olmstead or not, did you treat him, did you, did you did you did you?* “*Shit*, I don’t want to know...no I’d rather just,” he looked back to his right, to those legs, the hint of more; thinking appeared to be getting in the way, so Will decided not to think and instead asked, “can I touch you?”

“You can do anything you wish,” Hannibal said.

“Ok.”

Six words that seemed to cement the logic behind his seemingly illogical infatuation. *You can do anything you wish.* Hannibal Lecter, the first person to ever tell Will Graham he could be whatever he wanted to be, do whatever he wanted to, and the man wouldn’t run screaming.

And so he did, reaching out blindly with his right hand, palm flat. It hit skin, what must be a leg. There were hairs there, slightly raised at his touch. They felt velveteen as he moved his palm up, over what felt like a hip bone. His fingertips touched more, *soft and yet wiry*, and Will thought he might have made a sound. A sound he didn’t think he’d ever made before, something between a growl and a keen. It forced his eyes to follow his hand, looking over to see that he was very close, closer than he’d realised. He watched, an odd sense of calm washing over him.

“Have you?” he asked.

“Have I?” Hannibal answered.

“Done this before?”

“I have. Three times.”

“Oh,” he wasn’t sure if his fingers twitched or he was trying to test the waters of how far he could go, “well, that helps. What did you do, the first time?”

The silence turned playful. When Will drew his eyes up to those watching him he was met with a smile.

“You are a singular creature,” Hannibal stated as he took hold of Will’s wrist.

“Not the first time I’ve heard that. Only yours is a much more...” Will inhaled deeply as Hannibal moved his shaking hand over and down, resting it upon his cock, the strange thing whose scent was making his blood fizz, “civilised description.”

“I always try to be civilised, when possible,” Hannibal said as Will rolled onto his side, facing the man; the tenseness in his limbs was dissipating, slipping away.

“Are you going to tell me?”

“Not many would ask their partner to describe previous sexual encounters as foreplay.”

“Then I’m not many people.”

“As I stated before.”

The smile reappeared, followed by a small, subdued laugh that sounded more like an angry bee caught in a bell jar. Will found that, now he’d rolled onto his side, his body was leading him forwards with a strange magnetism, as if overwriting the paralysing fear and embarrassment that had struck it before. Will wondered if this was normal. Did this always happen? Would he always be struck by a strange sense of something *not-himself* when his hormones ran rampant? Did that mean he wasn’t himself now? It seemed anathema to all those years spent on the suppressants, detesting those that simply gave in.

“The first,” Hannibal began as Will curled down, crawling closer with a sheen in his eye until he was level with that strange place where his hand rested; he lay his head upon Hannibal’s hip and stared, moving his fingers gently over the surface. The penis was soft to the touch and yet hard beneath pressure, hot and energetic, “nineteen seventy five. I was fifteen.”

“What was she like?” Will asked, narrowing his eyes as he watched the appendage react to his gentle touch.

“She?”

“Statistically a male alpha’s first is a female omega, of that time period anyway. Was I wrong?”

“No, you were correct. She was older. Nineteen. One of our downstairs maids. It was amateurish. Rather fumbling and unattractive. When she showed me her breasts I remember they looked like the uncooked dough the servants would bake for bread. I don’t relish the memory.”

“You don’t like women?”

“Flesh is flesh. I prefer something a little more intimate than simple, physical lust.”

“You didn’t care about her.”

“Not particularly.”

“It was an experience then,” Will pushed up on his right arm and leaned on his elbow, turning to look up at Hannibal in his repose, “is that what this is for me? Are you my experience?”

“One in a list of many, I would hope. Unless you find me boring.”

“And what sort of experience am I for you?”

Lecter’s smile was difficult to decipher; *sinister or anticipatory? Or both?*

Will shook his head and laughed. The room felt heavy. The low light became cocooning. Things seemed to weigh down on him. A memory of a conversation they’d had, not long after their first time working together.

I don't find you that interesting, Will had said.

You will, Lecter had replied.

At the time it had seemed petty and arrogant. Now it seemed like a self fulfilling prophecy.

"I feel like...I've been drugged. This is odd. I *feel* odd. Did you?"

"Drug you?" Hannibal asked, "In a way I suppose. I have read studies on the sexual activities of those who are subject to long term suppressants. It seems there is a correlation between them, in that all suffer from heightened reaction to alpha pheromones when the suppressants are ceased. First glutamate is released followed by adrenaline then oxytosin, in larger amounts than normal. So far you are a wonderful example of the test group."

"Fear, then flight, then cooperation and attachment. Seems counterproductive to the process."

"It depends," Hannibal said; a hand appeared in Will's hair which was still slightly damp from the rain. Will felt his bottom lip between his teeth as he grabbed for the hand, holding it tightly. Hannibal watched him, "adrenaline also helps subjects deal with pain. If you're curious," Hannibal nodded to the hand in Will's grip, "the gland is located at the wrist, next to the cephalic vein."

"Do you always lecture the people you sleep with?" Will asked as he turned the hand, exposing the vein before leaning in, running his nose along the vulnerable skin and breathing in. It was what he imagined taking a hit might feel like. Wouldn't it feel like this? Maybe this was more instantaneous, he wasn't sure. All his lectures on substances and substance abuse flicked through his mind like a clacking rolodex. He closed his eyes and knew he was gripping the skin too hard. Wondered if it would bruise. *There had been no bruising on Olmstead, only the clean, strict entry and exit wounds of the chisels and metre stick and Stanley blade; a statuesque abattoir.* He felt the dizziness again, "*Christ*. You..."

"You may wish to slow down. Here."

The hands that pulled him upwards were gentle. Hannibal folded him up like the tie he had removed, and yet Will felt as messy and loose as the clothes Hannibal had discarded on the floor. *How could it be the same? It couldn't be the same, surely. One so gentle, so kind, able to commit such brutality*. He knew that wasn't true.

Then someone capable of such connection, he reasoned, *capable of feeling what I feel. What I am. There's no room in the profile for that. There's no room for empathy.*

At that moment Will wasn't able to admit to himself whether it was his want to believe it or his instinct not to believe it.

When he next took notice of where he was Will found himself stretched out along Hannibal's left side, slotted along his body. His head rested against a shoulder, his nose nuzzling in to find that wonderful scent he knew would be there at the neck, *pulsing out from below the jaw, next to the carotid artery*. His left hand snaked across the soft hairs on Hannibal's chest while Will breathed deeply and felt like he might be tipping on the edge of some horrendous

precipice. There was a giddy feeling in his gut. In the back of his mind, as he swallowed on a gag, he was worried he might throw up.

“I don’t feel...” he closed his eyes and lifted his hand to his mouth.

“It is normal. Your area postrema is detecting the pheromones as a toxin. The nausea will pass.”

“Will it be this miserable every time?”

“Well,” Hannibal said, brushing the curls back from Will’s forehead, “it is good to know I am not intended as a one night stand after all.”

“Who said the next time would be with you?” Will asked before retching, giving a brief sound of distaste at the bile which had jumped into his throat; *well,* he thought, *so much for hysterical laughter being the most unattractive thing I could do tonight.*

“Of course, how presumptuous of me.”

“Number two,” Will said, jumping on the distraction, “You haven’t told me about your second.”

A pause. Then the hand in his hair descended to the back of his neck.

“Perhaps not the best example.”

Will would have asked why but he had his mouth covered so he could breathe steadily without fear of completely ruining the night with vomit. Instead he looked up at Hannibal, finding him still utterly composed as always. Eyes finally found his.

“A professor in the college of medicine at the Lyceé in Paris where I studied. I was younger than the other students by two years and yet vastly superior in skill. I suppose that made me a target,” he blinked, only once, “it was not consensual.”

This time the bile came from another source. Will stayed silent as they broke eye contact. Hannibal rubbed at the top of his spine. The world seemed very small, as if they were hidden inside a casket. Will wondered if they could stay together in that deathly state. He thought he might be cold. *Am I dead from it?* he wondered, *Am I a corpse to be found?* He wanted to shake his head free of the thoughts, knowing they were not natural.

He wondered what his brain chemistry was doing to him. He wondered about the man responsible.

“Is that true?”

“Yes, it is. You doubt me,” said as a statement not a question.

“Sometimes I feel like you tell me things just to see how I’ll react, not because they actually happened.”

“True, I will not deny it. Unfortunately I am not lying this time.”

Will frowned and lowered his eyes. His left hand was doing zigzag patterns in between Hannibal’s pectorals. The hairs flopped back and forth like long grass in the wind. It was difficult not to lean in closer, rubbing their expanse of touching flesh up, then down, then up until the sensation was akin to the sparking shock of static. Will wished he could read him. Hannibal was calm and composed, even as Will’s nerves jangled and spat at the mere thought of *someone, anyone, hurting, touching, forcing*.

“Is he dead?”

“He is.”

“Then there must be ways to torment him.”

“You believe in heaven and hell?”

“No, but you do. Dante talked of lots of imaginative punishments for all sorts. The inner seventh circle is for violent pederasts; a desert of burning sand and burning rain,” Will bit down on his own anger at the thought of someone capable of such arrogant, greedy malice.

“Perhaps he received his punishment on earth, before he died. And I am sorry to correct you, I do believe in god but not in hell. Hell is a guilty construct. God is a moral one.”

“You mean you go in for the seven deadly sins and the commandments and all that? Didn’t peg you for it.”

“Oh, no you misunderstand. I mean to say that we can take solace in his example. God kills indiscriminately, and so do we. It is comforting, isn’t it? If there is a hell then God must live there too. That way, no one need fear their sins.”

“I thought that’s what the devil was for. To take all the bad press.”

“Maybe they are one and the same. How are you feeling?”

“Better,” Will took a deep breath, “a bit...mentally unstable, but I’m not going to throw up on you any time soon.”

“Good to know.”

It was odd to feel his body awakening. Before his mind had been desperate to get him here, to ask his question, to know the answer, and then to be as close as possible, practically another layer of skin upon his alpha. *His alpha*. Will rubbed at his face with messy fingers and made a growling sound, like an angry cat. The thought seemed ludicrous, and his mind was waking up too it seemed. Fighting back.

His alpha. You shouldn’t be here. *When have you ever needed anyone?* You are your own man, no one owns you. *This is all in your head*.

“Number three,” Will said tightly as he felt the hand at his spine circle round to tilt his chin up.

“Perhaps it is simpler to let me show you?” Hannibal asked, ever the gentleman; he waited until Will nodded before moving.

It was tricky to manoeuvre considering Will had tensed up. It made him feel jittery. Hypocritical. *What are you doing here?* he asked himself. He remembered back to the impetus that had goaded him into knocking on Lecter’s door in the first place.

The trace.
The link between Lecter and Olmstead.
The ER doctor naming Lecter as the attending surgeon.
The link that the man he was now straddling had yet to explain.

On his knees, Will gripped Lecter’s shoulders as the man sat up underneath him until they were face to face. All of the ins and outs of the investigation were rushing back in, trotting by like advertisements to his weak will.

He would be powerful, egotistical, yet charming, aloof.

What was he doing here? Will felt long fingers trace his spine, tripping up and over the slight lumps of the bone through the skin.

Involved in the medical profession, or perhaps retired. Aesthetic, educated, intelligent.

“We shouldn’t be doing this,” Will said suddenly, blinking; his pulse raced, but not as it had before.

He would hide in plain sight because his confidence and his ability left him untouchable.

“If you would like me to stop, all you have to do is ask,” Hannibal said reasonably as he held Will steady with one hand at his waist, while the other teased its fingers at the slit behind his solid cock, rubbing steadily to build an irresistible warmth. Will let his head drop forwards, a moan of pleasure tickling his throat.

“Most wouldn’t. By now, most wouldn’t be able to stop,” his voice had fallen down to a whisper.

“I am capable of many things you are not aware of. All you need to do is say. Do you want me to stop, Will?”

What are you doing here with this man who..?

The kiss was not real. Almost *not-real*. Almost enough to shock the thought from finishing. Tilting his head deepened it, and Hannibal let him.

Hannibal let him.

The fingers, two together, crooked before entering. Will took in a sharp inhale and frowned, eyes boring into the bedstead over Lecter's right shoulder. He jerked a little, feeling the pad of a thumb against his clitoris as the fingers inside him began exploring. It was as the thumb began to move that Will realised he'd been holding his breath. Breaking the kiss was natural but unreal. Letting the breath out was like a relief that wouldn't come, before drawing another deep. When he finally managed to find Hannibal's stare it was dissolute, pupils dilated widely, as if the iris itself were contracting.

"Your eyes..." Will said breathlessly.

Have they seen the red raw pain of humanity, displayed like sweet little pigs, trapped to walls and opened in bibles with tongues laughing in death? Such a fool, Graham. You told yourself not to be a fool.

"Vasopressin," Hannibal said, his lip twitching familiarly as he closed his eyes and swallowed; it was the most Will had ever seen the man admit that he was out of control, "it is not only you whose hormones try and take control. It's making me want to fuck you. Do you want me to fuck you?"

The words sent shivers across his skin. Real, *not real,* real, *not real.*

It wasn't real. It was not real.

"Yes," Will nodded; he licked his lips, "how...how long did it last? Your third?"

"How long would you like it to have lasted?"

How long did you keep them awake before you started cutting? Did you keep them awake to let them watch you, know you?

"You're..." Will closed his eyes and let out a stuttering moan as Hannibal added another finger, increasing the pace, "good at this."

"I always enjoy compliments. From experience I find omegas prefer to be on the bottom. Would you like to try?"

"You keep asking me," Will said, biting down on the need to cry out as his body spasmed with pleasure, "why do you keep asking me? I have no fucking clue what I'm doing."

I have no fucking clue what I'm doing.

"Yes you do," Hannibal leaned in and caressed the fluttering pulse at Will's throat with his tongue, sweet and slow, "listen to your instincts Will. They have never steered you wrong before. They brought you here to me, didn't they?"

A murder. A sin. A little death. Will shook his head and leaned closer, fumbling his lips across that indecorous mouth. *Shut up*, he wanted to shout, *just shut up*. *I don't know who I am, I don't know why I came here, I can't believe my instincts because they tell me things I don't want to know, I don't like who I become off the suppressants but I like you, I like you a lot, and Olmstead brought me here but I'll be fucking damned if I'll think about him now.*

Letting go with his right hand, Will reached down between them and wrapped his hand around Hannibal's fully erect cock, straining between them as if it were a lifeline. Hannibal seemed either unaware of or unable to control the purr he let loose as Will gripped it tightly and stroked downwards until he hit the unmistakable bulge at the base. The feeling of the heat against his palm made him frown, his breathing erratic.

"You're burning," he murmured a little deliriously, blinking as he allowed himself to be rolled over, straightening out his legs as Hannibal loomed over him; he felt helpless in the face of it all, and it was wonderful, "am I burning too?"

"Yes, Will. My darling," Hannibal stroked his face, smiling as Will turned into the palm and breathed in, "we burn together."

Afterwards he couldn't have said how long it lasted. At the time it seemed both quick and slow, time skewed by pleasure and chemicals in the brain. The pain of it was burning at every stage, as he opened himself, wanting to feel it, a strange and odd sense of loss and emptiness pervading him. And it did hurt, it hurt a fucking lot, but Hannibal was calm and patient and considerate and everything that Will had not believed an alpha in the midst of rutting was capable of being.

He clutched at the wide back under his palms and felt like he might break down. It was difficult to hold it all together, *the physical and the mental*, and separate it out. Eventually he gave up, let go, allowed the steady rhythm to pick up speed and sweep him away. The feeling was bizarre and yet disturbingly erotic, *feeling that sensual cock gently pushed deep inside, caressing and teasing.*

The rocking motion was hypnotic. There were words being spoken, the *hot wet breath* was back. It spoke and he listened, eyes hazy and weary. There was a heat building inside that he couldn't name, wasn't even sure if it was real. A racing pulse that spoke of the poison rushing in his system and the need and the want and the lust and the *can't know, won't know, please don't.*

Reaching in between them Will brushed his fingers over his own sensitive cock and winced.

"Oh *god*..." was all he could utter before he came, shaking violently until he choked on his own breath and his eyes rolled up in his head.

It was all a little blurry after that. There might have been a voice, asking him something. Or perhaps telling him something. He wanted to tell the voice to fuck off. He was tired. Warmly sleepy. Fuzzy and content and in no way awake as he came round from a post-coital orgasm blackout. But the voice persisted until he replied with a grunt. Will's eyes slit open like a paper cut.

"Will?" Hannibal was there, propped up on an elbow to his left, looking utterly composed despite the sweat tangled in his hair, "Ah, there you are."

"Shut up," Will groused, waving a pathetic hand towards the voice and the face that went with it.

“I see you are still tired, darling. Get some sleep.”

“I was asleep,” he said tetchily; when the warm weight pressed to his side made to retreat Will launched his weak hand after the retreating image, grabbing at what felt like hair, tousled and soft. He was amazed by how panicked he felt, even through the lethargy, “wait...”

A pause. There was a rustle of material and then fingers coaxed his to let go. Will took a long, sharp breath and felt his world tip about, floating on a rough sea.

“You have something you want to ask me.”

“Yeah. I mean,” Will yawned, hurrying it away and wishing he didn’t feel suddenly *so damn awake*, “it’s something I already asked you. Before. Earlier tonight I mean.”

“Earlier?” Hannibal scratched at his nose and frowned softly, “forgive me if I don’t remember. Tonight has been rather eventful.”

“Alright. It was about Olmstead. The ER?”

“Oh, of course. I fear your scent was rather...distracting, darling. Earlier, I mean,” Hannibal said; somehow Will found the wherewithal to smile softly at his own words being mirrored back at him, “you asked if I had treated him at the ER a few years back. Do you have a date?”

“The ER surgeon whose name was on the paperwork said she'd been down for the evening shift but you'd covered for her. Uh,” Will had to wrack his addled brain for the date, “Twenty seventh of March, twenty twelve.”

“Then I can certainly say it was not myself,” Lecter said with such confidence it shook Will’s fear into nothingness, “I was in a different state altogether. Washington, an overnight stay in order to see *Don Giovani* at the JFK centre. A present from my opera society for my birthday.”

“Can anyone corroborate that?” Will asked on instinct.

“Several. Including the director Francesca Zambello, who was courteous enough to meet with me. We discussed the use of tonal dissonance within each fach. It was enlightening, I had a wonderful time.”

Some said that it felt like a weight was lifted from their shoulders when a problem disappeared. Will disagreed. Instead he felt covered, swallowed, cocooned in the embrace of it, so much so that it crushed all the doubts and fears into junk and made him sink down with a smile into the pull. He closed his eyes and smiled, then laughed softly and shook his head.

“Will, I have something I would like to ask you in return.”

“Ok.”

“Did you just have your first sexual intercourse with a man you suspected of being the Chesapeake Ripper?”

“I didn’t suspect anything,” he lied, the uneasiness returning, “I just...I just wanted to make sure I got my answer.”

“You are a terrible liar, darling.”

“Would it make you feel better?” Will said irritably, clamming up; the cocoon suddenly wasn’t so safe, “If I said yes? Would it make sense of the fact that they all say I’m fucking crazy?”

“No,” Hannibal said calmly, watching him with an infectious confidence, “but it would make sense of my own conclusion,” he reached down and cupped Will’s jaw gently caressing his lips with the pad of his thumb; Will swallowed and wondered if his moods would always be so taciturn where Lecter was concerned, “that you are utterly singular. More so than any other I have ever met and, if you are kind enough, I would like to get to know you even better.”

Will found his lips moving before his brain could catch up, “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to sound like I was...I’m sorry.”

“Do not apologise. Never apologise to me Will,” Hannibal said, sitting up.

His hand seemed to be following the same directive as his lips, as it once more shot out without his conscious thought and grabbed Lecter by the forearm. The man looked to him with a soft inquisitiveness, one which made Will’s body light up with the memory of *hand and tongue and fingers and cock.* Taking a deep breath, Will forced himself to remember that he was supposed to be trying hard not to be a fool.

“Stay, would you?” he asked, “I’d like it if you...stayed.”

A pause, and then the sound of shifting material. A kiss against his forehead, chaste and affectionate. Then there were lips against his palm, and a warm weight settled across his left side. Will shifted to move underneath it instinctively and sighed, frowning to himself as he pushed as close as he could.

And despite the stress and the warm ache between his legs and the still venomous scent shifting down into his lungs, Will drifted off to the sound of words he would forget the next day.

“With you darling? Always.”

Chapter End Notes

Also yes, there was a line from 'Interview with the Vampire' in this chapter. I love that film, in all its camp glory

Impression/Understanding/Possession

Chapter Summary

> “You fantasise about mutilating your co-workers often?”
>
> “More than you'd think,” Will said with a small shrug, eyebrow raised and bottom lip pursed slightly, “but then most people have thought about killing someone at some time or another. I just have more of an arsenal to play with.”

Chapter Notes

> Bonsoir my delightful readers, it has been some time since I've managed to find time to update my stories. I'm sorry if anyone was waiting for more, things have been pretty much full of work, work and more work. Thankfully I've had 3 weeks off and am starting a new job on Monday, which has regular hours and will actually be interesting! Things are good, and hopefully this mean I will get more writing done.
>
> This set of pieces doesn't follow any strict timeline, all simply set around times Hannibal realised he was falling in 'love' with Will.

It was a happy confluence of events, starting with an unexpectedly early rise. Hannibal, as a rule, never woke voluntarily before eleven. It had always seemed counterproductive to do what society deemed healthy, especially when it grated against his natural biorhythms. Dawn was invasive, and mornings were far too obedient.

Yet today had been a special occasion. An invitation had been extended, finally the ability to see the handywork from the other side. Something that pulled and stretched at his need to never conform to another's will.

“We could use a medical perspective,” Jack Crawford had said over the phone, his voice slightly tinny, “if it isn't too much trouble of course, Doctor.”

Always a covertly slimy element to Crawford's obsequiousness; perhaps it was the indentured nature of his grovelling. Little placations tacked on the end of sentences, like the tail on a particularly bitter donkey. Another alpha's submissiveness was always distasteful, even though useful and, in his case, inevitable. However...

This time he would allow it. This time Crawford's forced courtesy had been permitted. This time he would wake early. This time he would play at conformity.

Because today he had been invited to the smorgasbord.

When he first arrived at the crime scene it was almost a disappointment. He pulled up a little ways back from the cavalcade of black SUV's, all in a line like sullen horses beside an average suburban two storey, all white walls and flowery front garden. The day was overcast and slightly chilled, so he had worn his heavier winter coat, a soft grey plaid with dark brown trim for the pockets. Underneath a red fleece, hiding a soft blue shirt and grey tie to match. He'd been rather flattered with the outfit when he'd chosen it, even through tired morning eyes as he rummaged his wardrobe for something appropriate for such an occasion. All that effort, and not a single person paid him a blind bit of notice as he parked, exited the car and began looking for Agent Crawford.

It was almost insulting in its apathy.

The first person he did run into was a young man wearing a blue jumpsuit, scruffy stubble and black curly hair surrounding a pair of harassed brown eyes. Hannibal sniffed while observing him, as the man fumbled with his camera and sighed, rooting through the boot of one of the closest SUV's, yanking off his latex gloves in annoyance.

“Excuse me,” Hannibal said politely.

“I swear, it's just...” the man was muttering, “*ugh* fucking...”

“Excuse me,” Hannibal spoke up, taking a few steps forwards; the man looked up in annoyance, keeping his frown, “I am looking for Jack Crawford.”

“He's inside with the boy wonder,” the man said flatly, “you the surgeon?”

“Indeed,” Hannibal would have been angry was he not so impressed at such a young beta talking to an elder alpha in such a confident manner.

“He'll be out in a minute,” the man said, shaking his head, “I'm sure we'll do all the introductions then. And maybe I'll be allowed back in my damn crime scene once Will Graham's had his *alone* time.”

There it was. Suddenly, an itch. The twitchy excitement that he'd experienced earlier that day had now jumped back into his throat. Firstly that Will Graham was here at all. There was a faint, *very faint,* scent on the air; sweet and yet sickly like overripe fruit. Made him feel the need to breathe a little deeper as he walked towards the unassuming home surrounded by an impromptu fence of black and yellow police tape. *Savouring the hunt*. A chance to catch his prey unawares.

Secondly, he had been told, or rather overheard, all the stories he could about intriguing little Will's talents. Heard the (rather ridiculous and absurd) claims that he was clearly psychic. Had heard that he liked time alone with the crime scene, sometimes with the bodies still in place if he could. Made people uncomfortable, clearly, but then people always feared what they didn't understand.

Hannibal always took advantage of any opportunity to enjoy new things, especially when offered up so neatly.

One officer, two officer, both admitting him politely and yet strictly to the scene. He suppressed a need to smile, instead looking around him as he walked up the slim, neatly paved path lined by small, round olive shrubs and beyond by smooth grass and peonies. He wondered if the killer had done the same. Did they enjoy the scent of the flowers as they approached, or were they only able to focus on their task? Hannibal breathed a little deeper, ferreting out the scents and categorising them.

In amongst the flowers and the grassy dew and the smell of forensic chemicals and plastic and nitrile gloves: there Graham nestled, out of sight, hiding.

The entranceway was the usual mess of tumbled shoes on a shoe rack, two pairs large, two pairs small, some wellingtons jumbled in a corner. The floor was carpeted in a soft beige, and, as he advanced into the house, the walls were an off cream. He frowned on observing the seventies bent of the furniture in the living room, wide armchairs and couches in teak, upholstered in mustards and yellows and browns. A set of ceramic flying ducks upon the wall. A false fireplace holding a three bar electric fire. Tacky. He hoped whoever took the house afterwards would have the good sense to modernise.

On hearing footsteps descending the stairs Hannibal made the quick decision to side step into the kitchen and keep out of sight behind the door. It was only a few moments later that Jack Crawford strode by, leaving the way Hannibal had entered, and shut the front door behind him. It was then Hannibal realised something else: the house was silent. No crime scene analysts, no photographs being taken, no cloth covered boot-steps. It seemed the man outside had been right, the house had been made clear for Will. He held his breath and closed his eyes, listening intently.

Then a creak, a few steps from...upstairs? Yes, he decided, upstairs on the other side of the house. He wished, as he normally did when going into another's house uninvited, that he had an idea of the layout in advance. Hannibal detested his victims being able to outmanoeuvre him, so entering and leaving the correct way was paramount, as well as blocking off escape routes. But as that information was sadly lacking, Hannibal made a snap decision to leave the kitchen as quickly as possible; it's windows were front facing and the last thing he wanted was Jack Crawford looking in and ruining his moment.

The stairs did not creak, thankfully, although they were covered with an unsightly layer of dust that made him feel itchy just walking across it. He had wanted to remove his shoes for stealth, but didn't think he'd be able to justify the action of replacing them when eventually caught in this act of voyeurism. Instead he stepped carefully and thanked the consistent layer of carpet covering every available floorspace. Even if it was unsightly with filth.

Upstairs led to an L-shaped corridor with four doors leading from it, one ahead of him, and three more off to his right. There was a large window in the longer part of the corridor which flooded everything with morning light. It seemed peaceful, as if he were simply the first to rise and wonder off to find others to join him for breakfast.

"*I bring them both back...*" a voice from the far end of the corridor, the door ajar, leaking a voice speaking mechanically, "*...to the place that I first saw them...no. No, not saw, imagined. You imagined them here, didn't you?"* a rustle of paper, probably reports being consulted, "*no, there was an unknown car outside. Repair truck no one could account for. You were watching. I watched you in here, which means the curtains were open."*

It was irresistible to creep closer, but the chance of failure only increased with every step. Each foot against the floor gave chance to a creaking floorboard, or a missed-footing thump, or simply Will Graham exiting the room and seeing him there.

Heartbeat, *faster*. Physiological changes, dilation of the pupil, salivation. Only Graham affected him so. When his medical examiner had seen fit to malign his veracity and health, beating the man to death didn't tip his heart rate up over ninety beats per minute, *though it had made the meat wonderfully tender*. Now the very scent of another, a voice speaking in his language; it was enough to make him feel something he could not control. There was an exhilarating tang to his meals. Feasting on Will Graham made him fat and greedy. Always a need for more, even if he liked to deny it.

The blood thrummed in his fingers as he traced the wall to his left, avoiding family photos and pictures of lakes in summer.

The familiar scent grew stronger.

On reaching the door Hannibal stopped, pressed against the wall, and listened to the sound of curtains being drawn. Will was setting the scene it seemed. Across from him was a large picture frame, a Klimt wrapped in gold and sensuousness. There, amongst the mosaic of shinning and shimmering light, was a figure moving, reflected upon the glass. A shadow walking, talking, breathing in the imagined skin of another.

"But that's not the reason. I don't kill you just to..." Hannibal watched the shadow hand reach out as if to touch, "no, this isn't about you, or I would have...so this is why I moved you both here afterwards, but first...the window. This is about you, *seeing me*."

Hannibal edged closer to the door frame. The light from the room tipped his fingers. *Seeing me*. The words danced around his reality. The thought blurred with the idea of his own masterpieces, of Graham walking through his work and slipping inside of his mind. The scent of the shadow increased as his nostrils flared. His salivary glands overproduced.

"I am the product. I am the sum of the whole," the shadow voice said, breathing deeply with understanding, slight elation, "I didn't kill with the first shot. Neither of you will die without seeing me take what is rightfully mine."

He could practically feel the voice against his skin. It was soft, cold and sharp. Deadly in its intent. Calm in its delivery. Hannibal felt the need to close his eyes, savour only that voice and it's chameleon quality.

And then, suddenly, the shadow moved. Then it turned from the shadow on the glass into real, solid Will Graham. Hannibal, holding his breath, could have sworn he felt Graham's jacket brush his fingertips as the man walked out and turned away from him, moving down

the corridor with a field report clutched in one hand, his other balled into a fist. And the eyes, *his eyes so grey with a hint of sky blue,* were set, dark, almost preternatural. Filled with an inner anger and contempt, buried deep beneath something soft. A calm acceptance Hannibal had not noted in him before.

The spike in Hannibal's heartbeat had reached the top of the roller-coaster, high above the earth observing all below and knowing at any moment the fall would come. He followed as Will moved to the next room and began walking another's footsteps. Bewitching him.

“I don't take them back to the bedroom,” Will explained to himself, walking into the room as Hannibal followed behind softly, “It's here, it's the children. I need to show them because I was them, once. It's me. I've come home.”

It was impossible not to stand in the doorway and watch him, Hannibal could not let go of the contact that it gave. Watching Will survey the room with his removed stare, alight with something akin to passion, and something akin to an inner violence. To watch his hands move as if to drag, as if to maim. To watch him while he dissolved down into his basest instincts so as to pour himself into the skin of another. *Feeling without feeling*.

A turning of the head. The darkness in the eyes did not dissipate as they zeroed in on him. Expecting an attack, Hannibal readied his muscles, balancing slightly forwards on his feet. Having watched him, now Hannibal found himself watched. *Eyes with no emotion, brimming with a need to complete their design.*

“You know you can't be here,” peremptory and cold, but not surprised, “get out.”

A moment in which Hannibal did not move, simply observed everything he could hope to, cataloguing body language and voice pitch and facial expressions; everything he could compare later. He played with the idea of continuing: *where it might take them, where it might lead.* But he was sure he had everything he needed. With a small, curt nod he turned to leave.

“Not out the front door,” came the voice from behind him, “Jack will be waiting for me there. Use the back. Check for Katz before you leave, she's working the garden.”

“You don't wish for them to see me? Or you don't wish for them to ask questions about what I have seen?”

“I'm not here to be your straw man Doctor Lecter, I know you've already made up your mind.”

“You always presume I have my own answers,” Hannibal answered, head cocked slightly, “and no imagination,” Hannibal trailed his eyes across Will's arm, down to the report and his still strict fists, “So many possibilities.”

Silence. Will watched him carefully, eyes slightly narrowed. Then a smile, *not the normal pleasant, warm smile he was used to*. With the cuff of his jacket Will scrubbed at his face, a small frown appearing and disappearing, eyes twitching; *almost as if he knew the expression he wore there was not his own.*

“Why now?” Will asked.

“An opportunity presented itself.”

“That was all?”

“If there had been an easier way I would have taken it. Something tells me,” Hannibal said, sniffing, “that you are not one to open up without provocation.”

“True. Only I don't think you really know what provocation means with me.”

“It was a risk I was willing to take.”

“Oh I don't know," Will said, eyes as sharp as his smile once more, “something tells me you don't ever fear risks.”

The thrill came. It swelled and morphed and settled in his stomach like the warm glow of whiskey after drinking. *I know you*, Will's words said, the likes of which he had never encountered with someone who did not *know* him completely, of which there had been very few, and now only one remained living.

“You wanted to see what I would do, didn't you,” Will said; it wasn't a question.

“And now I have my answer.”

“Yeah, me too.”

He looked up; grey eyes watching him tight, close. Hannibal smiled with the sweet sting of surprise as he finally realised that neither of them had come to work that day. The smell, slightly rotten sweet: *Graham was back on his suppressants, and therefore Graham had been expecting him; Graham had drawn him in like a siren; Graham had led him around the house, probably known that he was there all along*. He felt as if he'd walked into a spider's web, and now all eight eyes were upon him. The thrill intensified.

The thought of facing him, true identities revealed, no veil of secrecy between them...

“I will leave you to your work,” Hannibal tipped his head.

“I'm sure you will,” Graham replied, eyes watching his every move as he left, “sure you will.”

The sun on wet autumn leaves shone as blood cast upon the brown earth. Rustling little snakes, the trees in the breeze. Hannibal drove with the window down to hear the symphony. The air was sweet and fresh, wet with that morning's rain.

Will Graham lived just as he'd thought when they first met; far out from civilisation in an isolated community of his own making. Wolf Trap appeared to him as a desolate house dropped ramshackle in a mottled landscape, rough, blunt and mistrustful. Much like its inhabitant.

The Bentley suffered a little with the uneven driveway, but eventually reached even ground at the house's front. When exiting it was distinct the difference in sound and smell from the highway. There was a heavy smell of wet earth and decaying vegetation. The air was so clean it seemed he could feel it in every inch of his being. The house watched him suspiciously, as if Hannibal standing there in his maroon double breasted overcoat, hiding a red shirt, brown waistcoat and tie, and grey trousers with brown shoes was too much colour for it to trust. He sniffed, puling his surroundings down into his lungs. Graham's preternatural existence belonged here, not a sound of civilisation or another human soul for miles. The chill morning mist upon the ground simply completed the illusion.

Knocking at the door Hannibal noted the immaculate condition of the house itself. Painted crisply in white it seemed to shine in the sunlight, not a crack to be seen. Its quaint southern curls on the porch columns added a tug of interest. Graham seemed such a practical man that the small spin on the house's otherwise almost Georgian simplicity was intriguing. There were thick clusters of well trimmed ivy climbing up the end of the patio railing. Life against the white background.

Hannibal watched for a raised blind and listened for the sliding of the chain lock. When nothing came he knocked again. He stood for four minutes before deciding to investigate. There was no answer at the backdoor, only a littering there of half finished dog bowls and a water trough. The large barn just a little away from the house was locked up tight.

Hannibal turned back to look at the house and smiled.

Graham's lock was simple, and thankfully there was no chain, allowing for a simple lock picking. The door opened without a squeal, which he noted for later. Closing the door he surveyed first impressions: armchairs of varying comfort were littered in the living room, all second hand if their eclectic nature was anything to go by. A rather fetching antique rug lay on the floor, covering attractively varnished floorboards. At the far end stood an impressive cobblestone fireplace holding nothing but a small electric fire, and surrounded by immaculate shelves holding well ordered books, file folders, neat archive boxes, specimens in box frames and a select few artworks that seemed to have caught Will's eye. The other side of the room held a chest of drawers and various desks and small bookshelves, all caught with homely contents of books and lamps, tables covered with machinery in a state of being reassembled or pulled apart.

First impressions were somehow soft and warm, deceptively so. Furnishings were upholstered in flocked material, the rug was worn and almost rumpled, the clusters of home furnishings on desks was cosy and the pale green of the walls was soothing. Only on second glance did he pick up on the obsessive neatness, the need for every folder, piece of paper and small framed painting to be exactly where it was in relation to everything else. Chairs sat at perfect forty five degree angles to the coffee table. On the coat rack by the door the jackets and scarves were hung by shortest to longest and separated by use. In the chest of drawers each drawer was ordered to almost ludicrous degree of methodicalness, identical white nightshirts, socks and underwear layered like cake icing, coding out Graham's need for repetition and synchrony.

The kitchen barely existed, nothing but a small hob and oven, a few cabinets and a sink. Upstairs showed only a functional bathroom, old fashioned bath with a shower curtain, toilet and sink. In the bedroom the bedspread was military neat, and the surroundings were sparse above a ratty white rug: used for sleeping only, no luxury. The wardrobe held outfits hung already assembled on individual hangers, jeans and button down shirts and t-shirts and Henleys. Little material suits to burrow inside, it sat like a costume designer's rack on a film set.

Hannibal detected an animal instinct from sniffing around the floor plan. The house was quite open plan, in that each seating area afforded a view of the next two adjacent rooms through wide doors and arches in the walls. It would be difficult to sneak up on anyone in this house without care. No chairs held their backs to windows which themselves were large and well placed to survey the front driveway. Eyes peering out at the world, to see predators coming.

Everything outlined a pure silhouette of a man so capable of hiding himself behind what he saw as a perceived societal need for civility and familiarity that he kept his more undesirable traits disguised beneath the mask it provided. The obsessive need for control inside deep drawers, the plain colours hiding a vivid and vainglorious imagination that others saw as disturbing, the attempt at nestled collections of items that tried to appear homely but, instead, came across as trying too hard, the utterly precise nature in everything he did from fixing machinery to moulding himself into the minds of serial killers hidden in tight file folders and an easygoing penchant for fishing alone.

Hannibal was sure that, if Will could have gotten away with it, there would surely be one chair, one table, one bed, one wardrobe and chest of drawers and very little else. The pieces that were there, Hannibal thought as he very lightly drew his fingers over a tall painted scene of a woodland, had been chosen with great care. Things had been bought with a need for that specific item, rather than any idea as to how they would all fit together. A need for necessity, not what was expected by others.

Was the man afraid? He mused. Clearly not many people came out to visit, and yet Will felt the need to hide. Perhaps, Hannibal thought as he noted the outdated television and radio, that Will wasn't truly hiding himself from visitors and the judgemental eyes of normal people. Will Graham seemed to be trying too hard to convince himself that he was who he portrayed on the surface, and not the cunning and predatory animal that rested beneath his skin.

The space was so utterly Will Graham that Hannibal felt as if he were standing inside of the man's mind, split down the middle by society's specifications, so much so that Will couldn't pull it all together and be wholly himself. A man that Hannibal could tell would be easily malleable if handled with care, but also sharp as a razor when it came to recognising manipulation. This game would be a perfect mix: agrodolce.

Hannibal sniffed, smelling not a mote of dust on the air; running his finger along a nearby sideboard came away clean as a whistle. He imagined the entire house was exquisitely hygienic. It was almost maddeningly delightful.

Then a shiny sparkle from one of the nearby desks. On closer inspection he found a clamp holding a half finished fishing fly, intricate in its pillar box red feathers. Hannibal observed it through the magnifying glass suspended before it. Sitting down in the chair at the desk he

looked through the various bits and pieces used to build the flies. On a whim he chose another feather, observing its length carefully and testing the softness with his fingertips. Was this a sacred ritual, making the flies that would catch the fish he sought? Were all his lures so beautifully designed? Did Graham ever see his need to play the hunter with well crafted bait as ironic? Hannibal wondered, for a placid moment, whether Graham could be baiting him right now.

Taking a piece of twine Hannibal attached the feather to the lure with expert precision, tying it tight before snipping with the wire cutters. A small addition that only he would know of. A piece of himself there, like a seed in Will Graham's bone arena; one that would grow a mighty oak. Pressing the pad of his thumb to the sharp point of the fishing hook a blob of blood welled up. Hannibal brought it around the curve of the metal, leaving a fresh but almost invisible rust red stripe across the dark hook. Then he sat back and observed the fly, picking up the daylight seeping in through the pale blinds. He put his finger in his mouth and sucked; sour iron and a small hint of the turpentine Will probably used to clean off any stray glue.

Just an intimately small speck of another in that precise and neurotic environment. Hannibal smiled before standing up, making sure the chair was correctly in position before leaving and relocking the door.

And when he turned, there it was. He felt as if he should have expected it, somehow, and decided to treat it as such. A medium sized, slightly shaggy and dirtily matted auburn furred dog. It sat down on the mud in front of the porch at the bottom of the stairs and watched him. Hannibal watched it in return. As he descended the stairs the dog remained still. Hannibal eventually reached the animal and stopped. They watched one another and Hannibal remembered being able to smell dog on Will on occasion, although the inside of his house showed he owned no pets. Only the food bowls on the back porch gave away his need for company.

Holding out his hand the mutt sniffed tentatively and then offered a cautious lick. Hannibal waited until the dog was content and then stroked the creature's head. It stood up and trotted off, every few steps turning to look at him over its shoulder. After fifteen feet it stopped and waited. Eventually Hannibal acquiesced, following.

Woods thin enough to enjoy and easy enough to navigate. He assumed Graham walked this route with his stray often if the dog was this well versed in the well trodden route. And if the multiple dog bowls at the back porch meant anything then there might even have been more than one dog rummaging the under brush. The light shifted with every rush of the breeze, playing kaleidoscope with his eyes, the needles and leaves like a woollen carpet under his inappropriate shoes. The dog walked ahead, checking every now and then that he was there with a serious glance backwards from dark eyes.

Eventually they reached a spot slightly higher than the flat land below, and the dog stopped. Hannibal watched the creature with interest. Why had this trust been extended to him? Had it smelled Graham upon his clothes? Or was there a deeper connection that the dog recognised? Turning to look back the way they had come he stopped at the sight: the house sat there, perfectly framed by the hanging branches, not far but far enough. The structure seemed to sit

upon the mist, as if it were floating in a lake. The eddying breeze swirled the mist, as if fish were disturbing the water to feed. It was a fair sight. Will's ability to ferret out the unusual and marvellous obviously extended to more than just the macabre.

He turned to the dog and looked down at it, bedraggled and solemn.

“Thank you,” he said, tipping his head down and to the side, keeping eye contact; the dog simply watched him, but stood up and returned with him as he walked back the way they had come.

As he walked the telltale sound of a truck trundling up the long driveway alerted him. Breaking the edge of the wood Hannibal observed Will Graham exiting his faded blue Volvo truck, closing the door behind him with a dull thump. The man seemed utterly at home, even with Hannibal's surely unexpected arrival. He stood by his truck, which he had parked neatly by Hannibal's Bentley, and waited for the two travellers to reach him.

“Good morning Will,” Hannibal greeted.

“You get up late, Doctor Lecter,” Will noted, reaching out as the dog approached and stroking its head.

“Hannibal, please,” came the reply, “we did agree first names or nothing.”

There was a small moment of tension, before Will smirked and shook his head, “I see you've met Winston.”

“I was unaware a stray could own a name.”

“Well,” Will said, watching as the dog trotted off around the house, probably to partake of the food there, “maybe it's just my label for him then. I'm pretty sure he doesn't answer to it.”

There was a silence but for the birds, then Will turned back and retrieved some groceries from the car. Before Hannibal was able to offer his help Will had placed a tall paper bag in his arms filled with seasonal vegetables. If it wouldn't have given away his rouse Hannibal would have ask how on earth Will hoped to cook this tempting fare on his pathetic stove. Instead he took advantage of Will inviting him inside without having to say so. Apparently it was a given that Hannibal was welcome.

“Just put it on the counter,” Will said as he put his own bag on the coffee table and emptied its contents: screws, rivets, nuts and bolts, wire. A litany of mechanical pieces in thick plastic pouches emerged and were set out neatly.

Hannibal put the groceries down and turned to watch Will as he took off his coat and hung it on the rack in just the correct place, then took off his boots and put them beneath. Hannibal followed the example, enjoying the feel of Will watching him do so.

“You here about the most recent?” Will asked as he started putting away the vegetables.

“Jack asked me to bring you out a box of treats,” Hannibal said as he observed Graham operating in his environment; he wondered if his own presence was affecting that interaction

at all or if it was normal for Will to be agitated while storing foodstuffs, “medical documents Agent Crawford said that you requested. I collected them from St James.”

“But first you thought you'd come here and take a walk in the woods with my dog.”

“Oh? I thought you didn't have a dog.”

There was a micro-hesitation in Will's movements, a soft whispering sound that might have been something muttered under his breath, before he continued. The stray and his court of strays. Hannibal managed a small smile at the thought. When Will looked to him Hannibal did not look away. They held each other's stare until Will finally looked elsewhere, beginning to rummage through cupboards and pull out a bag of coffee, two cups. A stovetop percolator made an appearance, which Hannibal admitted he found surprising.

“The casework is in the car if you would like me to fetch it,” Hannibal offered.

“You had breakfast?” he was asked instead.

“Unfortunately nothing appetising. We are expected at Quantico in an hour.”

“I have...” Will seemed to hesitate, less to think of ingredients and more as if he was suddenly questioning his offer, “...uh, I can make French toast.”

“I would hate to cause inconvenience.”

“You're a guest,” said like a man who had no idea how treat them.

“Get many of those, Will?”

“How do you like your coffee?” Will said, ignoring Lecter's comment altogether.

“Black, please. And strong.”

Watching Will cook was calming in its meticulousness. Each stage of the process played out with precision, down to how long each piece of bread soaked in the egg and cream mixture, to how long each were fried, to how much coffee was put in the stovetop coffeemaker, how tightly it was tamped down, allowed to percolate slowly.

They sat at a dining room table that looked as if it had never been eaten at, instead quickly cleared to make it look civil. They ate in silence, Hannibal's a happy one as he enjoyed the custard-like centre of his toast and the sweetness of the icing sugar. Will's silence more a terse confusion: a slightly sullen crow, watching him with a beady and yet constantly evasive stare. The meal was enjoyable, for more than just the food. Hannibal felt nourished with a successful morning's harvest; Will Graham had scraped forward a few notches towards the shining trap, even if his eyes were still wary, and Hannibal had confirmed his suspicions.

Sitting in this tiny speck of wood floating on misty waters, he could say with certainty that the inevitable catch would be something he had dreamed of for many years. And well worth the wait.

An eternity, he was sure, would have been shorter.

“It may be necessary to test the concurrence of curved lines in two exhibits similarly enlarged...”

Hannibal trailed his eyes across the heads sloping away from him in the lecture theatre, little silver lined silhouettes. He played a quick game with himself to see if he recognised any of them, coming away with a couple he could be sure of. It grew tiresome and he stopped.

“Greasy finger-marks may also be acted on chemically, so as to bring out details by the application of osmic acid...”

He suppressed a sigh and waited for the part he'd come to hear, the only reason that he had agreed to attend. Telling himself it would be worth it, to learn some of the inner workings of their most recent case. Also attending as a favour to Will Graham that he would happily collect later. That the man had asked if he'd like to come with him to Price's lecture, which needed an invite, was a key step in his plans. When looking to the seat to his left, however, he was unable to withhold his disappointment.

“With the exception of acromegaly and skin-peeling after acute fevers, I could have conceived of no biological reason why changes might be anticipated in those patterns...”

Will Graham sat next to him, chin down at his chest, asleep. Hannibal let out a tight chuff through his nose and pressed his lips together until thin. This was beginning to feel like a wasted journey. He listened to Price continue his lecture, speaking about the odd case of Georgia Madchen and her sock-like shedding skin. Elongated fingerprints seen as a first in forensic history. Hannibal refused to wake the man who had invited him, waiting instead for the clapping crowd at the end of the show to rouse Will accusingly. Blinking awake Will drew in a sharp breath, sitting up, catching Hannibal's eye as the man clapped along with everyone else.

Neither spoke as they shuffled down the stairs with the other attendees, but Hannibal hoped his dissatisfaction was palpable. Meeting up with familiar faces in the refreshment room did nothing to dispel his mood. Beverly Katz and Jack Crawford stood with fake sparkling wine, Jimmy Price joining them as Zeller trailed behind, trying to snag a drink from passing waiters.

“Did you enjoy the lecture?” Crawford asked, looking as if he were enjoying an inside joke.

"As always, your expertise is fascinating Mr. Price,” Hannibal said, a little confused when Price grinned, “I am missing something.”

“You look pissed,” Katz said bluntly, “let me guess. Will started snoring five minutes in.”

“Give me credit,” Will said, eyes still heavy lidded, “it was at least ten.”

“He does it every time,” Price said, seeming entirely unconcerned and somewhat chipper, “heard it all before, huh Will?”

“Yup,” Will said, rubbing his eyes, “sorry Jimmy.”

“Don't worry about it. You stay awake when I talk in the morgue, that's all that matters to me.”

“You just like it when he kisses your ass,” Zeller, joining them empty handed, seemed more sour than usual.

“The worm that destroys you is the temptation to agree with your critics,” Hannibal said.

“Couldn't find a drink, huh?” Price said dryly, taking a swig in Zeller's face.

“Enjoying that fruit juice, Jimmy?” Zeller asked.

“Please, if anyone gets to make fun of my recovering alcoholism, it's me,” Price said.

“Please guys, do we have to psychoanalyse out of work?” Beverly said, only partly joking.

“It's always hard and ugly to know someone can understand you without even liking you,” Zeller said, shaking his head as Price simply began enthusing at him about his lecture.

Beverly was smiling into her drink, muttering to Will who was giving her a wry look in return. Crawford continued to talk, demanding Hannibal's attention; he pretended to listen while eavesdropping on the pair just a few feet to his left.

“Ah, come on,” Will said in return to whatever Katz had whispered; she leaned in close and continued, Will smiling despite his tone, “you're not right, you know that?”

“Don't I though,” she said, shrugging.

The feeling that had been niggling inside his chest squirmed. Hannibal felt suddenly nauseous, enough to worry him. He took a drink of cheap alcohol and hated that it was all he had to swallow down his rising bile. Is this what it would cost to be attracted to an omega? He had assured himself that this courtship would be his game, under his control. But biology was simple and cruel. It made him feel a distinct sense of helplessness, something he had not felt since his seventh year on this earth. He was a man of logic, of calculations leading to outcomes. Too much imagination played a part in his theories being mainly untested scribblings on thick pads of paper, astrophysics and string theory trying to bring the broken tea cup back to its untouched state. Now he was finding himself adrift amidst a sea of unforgiving chemicals: serotonin, dopamine, pheromones.

Hannibal made small talk until the night began to wind down. He congratulated Price on his work, made promises to Crawford to continue their working relationship, said a polite goodnight to Zeller and managed to pry Graham and Katz apart long enough to offer Will a ride home. As they drove Hannibal let his mind drift, thinking about his newest revelation. With Graham's scent filling his nose Hannibal decided not to tie himself up too much with theories and needs; instead Occam's Razor would be his guide.

“You're angry,” Will said suddenly, “what did I do?”

“You misunderstand,” Hannibal refuted, “I am more confused.”

“About what?”

“Your insistence that I join you tonight when you were clearly not interested in my presence.”

“Feeling left out? That's a first.”

“I don't appreciate being mocked.”

Silence, but for car wheels thrumming. Will rubbed his nose and sat back, relaxing as much as seemed possible.

“I'm sorry,” he said easily, “look I...I didn't mean to make you feel...” he let out a puff of breath and laughed, eyes smiling, “next time I'll go on my own.”

“On the contrary, I found it very interesting. Your co-workers are their own tribe, I can appreciate that. Price seems to crave attention.”

“I like Jimmy fine. But sometimes he labours on about the print index for so long I think about what he'd do if I cut his fingers off.”

“Conclusions?”

“Probably scream a lot. It would be just as irritating.”

“You fantasise about mutilating your co-workers often?”

“More than you'd think,” Will said with a small shrug, eyebrow raised and bottom lip pursed slightly, “but then most people have thought about killing someone at some time or another. I just have more of an arsenal to play with.”

“Anyone in particular?” Hannibal tread as carefully as he could.

“Oh, uh,” Will screwed up his eyes and seemed to be contemplating how wise it was to have this conversation, “I have a recurring dream about killing Jack Crawford with a hammer. Whenever he purposefully ignores me I can't really help it.”

“I often have a fantasy of pushing Marissa out of a window.”

“Your boss?” Will asked.

“Yes. She is a detestable woman, and very tall. I wonder how she would land. She stands next to open windows all the time. It would be almost effortless.” Hannibal said, noting Will's mirth; he decided to push further, “And what of myself?”

Will's eyes jumped to him, sharpening. Then he looked away, out of the window at the passing city. Scars of reds and yellow and neon ripped past. The city looked like a sparkler on

bonfire night, reflected in Will's eyes like a firework.

“You want to know how I've thought of killing you.”

“I am in anticipation,” Hannibal said blatantly; a need to give Will as much space to move as possible, to hear dark words spill.

Will watched him with a velvet softness, if it were dragged through with barbed hooks ready to catch. Hannibal stayed aloof, teasing out the treat.

“...When we first met you used to tell me a lot of things I didn't want to hear. If I entered a room and you were there I knew I'd have a fight on my hands to stay civil. You made me arrogant and savage. I hated it. Still kind of do. I used to think of...something heavy.”

“Baseball bat?” Hannibal suggested.

“Golf club,” Will corrected.

“Oh?”

“Leaves an interesting blood spatter. Never seen it? Thin, almost clean spray lines. Like a Pollock. And it takes skill to use it. Easier to miss. You need to mean every swing or it wont connect.”

“Your knowledge always fascinates me,” Hannibal said, replacing the words *thrills me* with something more appropriate. Although, considering how inappropriate their conversation was Hannibal wondered whether there was a need to censor himself.

“It comes in handy when you're feeling...” Will left the sentence hanging.

“Enraged?” Hannibal offered.

“Homicidal,” Will said, “or a hot mess, if you want to use Beverley's label.”

A hit of that squirming, that roiling nausea at the mere mention of the name. He knew it was unreasonable and unfounded, which only made it worse. It was with disgust that he realised the reason for his reaction. Is this jealousy? That was what he asked himself as he once more caught the grey wolf's stare in his peripheral vision. Yes, he would have answered had the question been verbal. There was a need to be honest to allow Will to drift closer, closer, until it was impossible to tell the difference between one man and the other. A shadowed mirror, staring into the void on the other side. The thought of it was exhilarating. He surprised himself with how much he wanted it to be a truth.

Risks were not part of his life, but now he felt *risky*. It would be like living in the lion's den, but then the tragedy was not to die, but to be wasted. In the end it was the simple solution to a problem he didn't realise existed.

“I would like you to come home with me,” Hannibal said, hands turning the wheel slowly to change his route.

“You would huh?” Will asked, jaded, “I think I can see where this is going...”

“On the contrary,” Hannibal said, making Will twitch his attention closer, “There's plenty of room for your collection in my library. I have a wonderfully located guest room. It gets the sun in the evening, is warm throughout the day. I am not inimical to pale green, if you want to change the paint. Or if you are not adverse to losing some personal space, my bedroom is large enough to share.”

Stopping at a red light and cranking the handbrake up allowed Hannibal time to look at his passenger. Will was staring at him, eyes dark, brow low. He looked like a snake sitting under a rock, waiting for a hand to come near. Hannibal raised a brow and looked back to the road, pulling out as the light turned green.

“I will not be able to offer you the isolation you need, but I would hope my company would not disturb that equilibrium,” Hannibal said as he indicated right.

“You're asking me to move in with you,” Will said bluntly.

“Yes.”

“Uh huh,” Will drew the words out warily.

“A rather vague acceptance.”

A laugh, low but warm, “I wasn't...uh...”

Hannibal allowed Will to mull over his amusement. For a moment he wondered what Katz had whispered into Will's ear; telling him secrets or pointing out the obvious? Had she seen his plans even before Hannibal himself? He refused to underestimate someone Will respected.

“It appears I am once again not in on the joke,” Hannibal said a little stiffly.

“Does that matter?”

“That depends entirely on...”

“I'll need a lab. That's what I use the barn for at home, so I'll need a replacement.”

As they pulled into his street, once again Lecter felt a flush. Manipulation and satisfaction: from what he knew of Will Graham the man would never have agreed to something so drastic so very easily. Once more he had followed his own temptations and ended up with a collar around his throat; Invisible, tight. Hannibal felt a warm glow encapsulate his evening. It occurred to him in that moment that with all his knowledge and intrusion, he could never entirely predict Will, or own him at all. Graham knew what he wanted, and he'd made sure it was exactly what Hannibal wanted, whether he liked it or not. Thankfully for Graham, Hannibal loved nothing more than playing the game with a willing participant.

“I do not wish to rush you.”

“Yes you do,” Will said knowingly, “but that's alright. I can be rushed, from time to time. You're not the only one who makes snap judgements.”

“We assign a moment to decision, to dignify the process as a timely result of rational and conscious thought. But decisions are often made of fermented feelings, bitter and stringy. I enjoy your raw motility.”

They sat in the driveway, looking up at Lecter's dark town house in all it's Edwardian appeal. So far from Will's ship on the sea, but so close to the place he wished to create for them. Hannibal tried to imagine a world with Will at every corner of it; sprightly, evasive and stimulating. There would be much to do, and lots to draw a veil across. Will was sharp and Will was capable but Will was blind in the face of affection.

“I hope you will like it here,” Hannibal said as he unlocked the door and held it open as Will stepped inside almost cautiously, looking simultaneously traumatised by his own rashness and excited by the prospect, “I hate to think of you lonely.”

“Then you must hate to think of me.”

“Will, my darling,” Hannibal said, reaching out to cup his face; Will leaned in the touch subconsciously before blinking and lifting his cheek, rubbing at his face, “if you'd let me I would have it that you could never be alone again.”

“Sounds awful,” Will smiled darkly, “I love it already.”

He was charming in the way a cub is charming, a small cub that will grow up to be like one of the big cats. One you can't play with later, unless you were a big cat yourself. To know that they were twinned souls was gratifying, beatifying, *divine*.

Deal/Devil

Chapter Summary

She juddered to a halt, causing her to drop a small ink pot. They both watched it fall, the glass top ejecting at speed. She hurried to pick it up, grabbing a wad of blotting paper to try and stem the mess. It was a significant amount of time before she spoke. Hannibal simply watched her, waiting.

“What would you like me to say?” she finally offered.

“I hear that congratulations is a favourite of gushing aunts,” Hannibal sat down on the chaise longue, “but then you never were.”

Chapter Notes

It is important to have read at least, "Chapter 6: Teeth, Claws and Ink" from 'Il Faut Souffrir Pour Être Beau' to understand the references in this chapter, so if you haven't then please read Will's first flashback in that chapter (in italics). This chapter ends where chapter 1 of 'Il Faut Souffrir Pour Être Beau' begins...

Apologies again that this is so very tardy. It's taken a while to get this one together, and it's been thorugh a hell of a lot of re-writes! I have decided to go ahead with this chapter, understanding that it is a conclusion which can be looked past. For those who requested scenes not yet written, I will still be doing so. I have bottled out and decided this will not be the last chapter, as this story is mainly non-linear and thus the timeline can be played with. Also I have too much fun writing this story. So apologies if your request is not part of this chapter, I will review them and post the next chapter as soon as possible.

The hospital ward smelled of boiled cabbage and antiseptic. Sickness barely disguised by chemicals. Old people. There was no rush here, no hustle and barely regulated chaos that came with the ER where Hannibal normally worked. Instead it was sleepy, hushed under dimmed lights and pulled curtains despite it being mid-afternoon. Vocal silence, leaving only the machines to chatter to each other; *beep beep beep bzz bzz hiss huff.*

Will Graham felt like he’d walked into a graveyard, only more depressing. The nurse’s station was at the other end of the ward, past a set of single rooms on the left and what appeared to be bathrooms on the right. He walked fast with his head down, ignoring the sometimes lonely sometimes hopeful looks from beyond half open doors. When the gnarled hand grabbed his arm he flinched, breath stuttering. The man that appeared when Will flicked

his eyes up seemed like he'd been stretched out over centuries, tall and lanky, flesh loose with age and marked with liver spots. Will hated that he stared at him as if he knew him.

"Simon, that you my boy?" the thin voice of the old man said hopefully.

"Come on Frank," a nurse hurried up to them and took hold of the man's arm, holding his hand as he looked to her in confusion, "you want to go to the bathroom? I can take you honey," she quickly steered the man past Will, to whom she offered a conciliatory and yet professional smile.

He hurried faster. At the nurse's station he found a young man with bright eyes that made him seem overly keen, yet held the red rims of someone who had been up all night.

"Are you here for a visit?" the man asked.

"Ah, no," Will said, holding up a stack of paper in a manilla folder, "I have some things for Dr. Lecter."

"Right, yes," the young man said, tapping his fingers quickly against the wooden desk, "right. He said something about that. I think he wanted them pretty bad, but there are only two of us on duty here. I'm sorry to ask but would you mind taking them to him?"

"He's not here?" Will asked agitatedly as a woman behind him started groaning in an over dramatic fashion, holding her side -*oh doctor, why won't you get the doctor to come and see me?*- she said over and over.

"He was, until about half an hour ago. Then he had to go to the meeting that he needed those files for," the nurse said, standing up and starting to shift towards the groaning woman, "floor four, room fifty five. It's at the junction of wards fifteen and sixteen," he said, turning away, "now come on Brenda, I told you the doctors are coming at three. They'll see you then..."

A rough sigh was all he could manage before making his escape. Curse Hannibal and his misplaced fucking paperwork. Seriously, who had paperwork in this day and age? Hospitals did, Will griped as he shoved the folders under his arm and quickly doused his hands in anti-bac by the door before leaving, rubbing them together furiously.

He hated hospitals. He *hated* them. And Hannibal knew that. It was why he never visited his husband at his job. The cloying atmosphere, the smell, the sounds...

"*You didn't come yesterday," his father said; the monitor's around them beeped and hummed and people walked around the bay as if Will and his father did not exist.*

"*I came. You were asleep."*

"*You didn't come," accusatory, hiding underlying fear, "I asked the nurses."*

"*They must not have seen me then," Will said softly.*

"*Don't lie to me boy," his father said, coughing roughly, and again, and again; Will thought that maybe he should pat his back, or take his hand, or something like that. He didn't.*

Everything just kept moving around them. It took a while for Will to realise that the person who did not exist here was himself.

"*I'll be back tomorrow," Will had lied, "you'll be home soon anyway."*

His father hadn't replied. Will had left. Standing outside in the cold air at the busy hospital entrance, in amongst the smokers all hauling in desperate puffs, his back to the wall as he breathed in the venomous air and hoped it would calm the racing in his mind as he thought about his father's impending death and tried very hard to persuade himself that he cared.

"Excuse me, sir!" said an urgent voice.

Will looked up sharply and had to hurry back against the wall, almost tripping over himself as a burly orderly with a bald head pushed a hospital bed past him fast enough to make its wheels shake. He drew a breath and sighed, realising he'd dropped a couple of the papers from Hannibal's files. He hunkered down to grab them, rubbing irritatedly at his eyes.

"Get it together Graham," he murmured, standing up and continuing on, eyes up to see what was coming.

It didn't help that he could still feel the hormones circling his body, sabotaging his every waking moment. Things had become, he wouldn't like to say it but had to admit it, desperate. Over two years now and no closer to his need, his want, his dream of having a family. His mind was beginning to fray at the constant disappointment and guilt, but his body wouldn't release him from its clawing *want* . The new pills he'd tried had been a trial drug, purporting to give all the benefits of fertility with reduced physical and emotional side affects caused by the hormones. Two months later and Will had found himself standing in the street, paranoid as hell that everyone they passed was looking at him and screaming at Hannibal that he " *just can't take it any more!*". That had led to Hannibal systematically finding all of his pills, taking them to the garbage disposal and grinding them down into the drain. And then led to an equally emotionally charged argument about whether or not this should be their last attempt.

As far as Hannibal was concerned the treatments had ceased permanently. As far as Will was concerned Hannibal could stick his permanently where the sun didn't shine. Home life had become fraught. Will had started finding any excuse to be outside, away from the cloying cell-like feel of his house. He began to worry that Hannibal found it insulting, as they were barely spending any time together at all.

And now this, forcing Will to come to the one place Hannibal new he detested above all others. Will couldn't help but feel the sting.

It took him minutes of frantic searching and then garnering assistance to find room fifty five. It turned out the number had been covered up with the 'meeting in progress' sign. When a very harassed looking surgical secretary showed him to the door and gave him a look as if he might be simple, Will didn't have the courtesy in him to say thank you. Instead he knocked on the door twice and then entered, his foul mood leaving no room for manners.

Inside the small room was an even smaller, square table with three people sat around it. The walls were bare, but for a chart about the workings of the gastrointestinal tract and a poster asking him if he'd washed his hands properly. And a lone sink. It made the three seemingly very important looking people at the table look even more laughable than their out of place surroundings did.

Although, Will thought with guilty bias, it was difficult for Hannibal Lecter to look laughable. Especially in a white coat over green scrubs.

"Will," Hannibal said with curious surprise after an awkward pause, "ah, you have brought them."

"Yeah," Will said, flustered and a little sweaty from rushing, "sorry it's late."

"Not at all," Hannibal said, pushing his chair back until it hit the wall, forcing him to slide out a little inconveniently.

"Wonderful," said one of the other occupants of the room, which Will had paid not a blind bit of notice to; this one was a tall woman with mousy brown hair, tied up messily over just as messy and tired a face, "at least we don't need to meet again tomorrow, now."

"And here I thought you were enjoying my company," the other one said; when Will scanned his face he froze. They locked eyes. The man frowned, tilting his head.

*"You like to play games, I can deal with that"...*the memory seemed to come unbidden. Will pushed it away madly and scratched at his neck. *It surely wasn't, was it? Hollow, hollow, hollow eyes full of hunger.*

"Will Graham," the man said, eyes finally lighting up in recognition as he pointed his finger.

Will bit at the inside of his lip and, for a short moment, listened to the silence that had settled over them all. He felt as if he'd tripped and fallen into his own subconscious, as if this might all just be part of an obscure nightmare. It wasn't a pleasant place to fall into, and he hadn't expected it to be so visceral.

"Max Griffin," Will said by way of reply.

"Ha," Max smiled triumphantly, "you remember me too, huh?"

"I have an eidetic memory, I remember everyone," Will said acerbically, "don't think you're special," he turned to Hannibal who was simply observing with calculating eyes, "I'll see you at home."

Leaning in to kiss Hannibal at the corner of his mouth should have been an affectionate need, rather than Will grasping for an anchor that was slipping through his fingers. There was a strange sense of deja vu. A sickness that spiralled around in his mind, seeming to dredge up his demons.

Leading him back to days when his fate had been held in the hands of others, his young age and status keeping him low beneath the surface even as his mind tried to break the waters and swim free. Memories of his father's suffocating need to prove himself worthy of a better life, using Will as his instrument. Arranging marriages to tie their meagre, dirt poor family into something brighter, better, wealthier.

He wondered what his father would have thought of his hitching himself to the Lecter family. He was sure he would have been overjoyed.

"*Never make our bed out in the cold again," he would have said, smiling with closed lips, "you got the gifts, boy. Better use 'em."*

He hadn't thought of his father in a long time. Hadn't thought of Max Griffin in even longer. Will felt like he had walked backwards and was falling. He wondered how long before he saw the cell door close before his eyes.

"And here I thought you detested teaching," Hannibal said as they sat in the sunny cafe, window seats despite it being busy because Hannibal was a regular who had done a favour for the owner (Will tended to find that was the story at most of the eateries they attended, but was never given a satisfactory reason as to what).

"I don't hate teaching," Will shrugged, sipping his hot chocolate; Will was no longer able to appreciate American chocolate since Hannibal had introduced him to European stock, "I just hate students. This way I don't have to interact with anyone. Just...advise. That's all."

"I see. It seems online teaching was built for a man of your proclivities," Hannibal said as he slid his fork through the delicate *opera* desert on his plate and inspected the forkful keenly before tasting, "I think Petor may be skimping on the cocoa and increasing the gelatine. A poor man's trick."

"Oh come on, I like this cafe," Will sighed, rubbing at the bridge of his nose, "don't make us start the search all over again."

Hannibal sniffed, pursing his lips before licking them. After a moment he continued eating. Will relaxed. It wouldn't be the first time that he had been forced to vacate cafes and restaurants because of unreachable standards and a picky palate.

"Try some of mine," Will offered, holding out his cup; it felt like a libation offering.

He couldn't help the smirk gracing his lips as Hannibal sipped the chocolate, closing his eyes and licking his lips after the first swallow. Will knew effective bribery when he saw it.

"All is forgiven?" Will asked as he accepted his drink back.

"Not quite."

"Thought not."

“It isn’t possible to forgive when you are not offered a chance to.”

Will’s smirk turned sour. Taking a long breath he turned his drink between his fingers, spinning the blue mug and watching the light catch in the glaze. The sounds in the quiet cafe seemed to take on a more astringent quality, cutlery clanging together, the milk steamer screaming. Hannibal never liked to approach things face first, rather from the peripheral. Will wished, for once, he would stop playing him when it came to the possibility of a child.

“I wish you would talk to me, darling.”

“I see, trying a new tactic are we?” Will asked facetiously, “I don’t want to talk about this here.”

“You do not wish to talk about it anywhere,” Hannibal justified, signalling to the waiter that he would like the cheque.

“Because I don’t want a fight, and *don’t*...” Will lifted his fingers from the table, leaving the heel of his hand flat against the wood, “...don’t pretend. Please.”

“As you wish,” Hannibal conceded, slightly stiff. They sat in silence for a minute or two, neither looking at the other, “I see. Well, if you are going to take away with one hand, at least offer the other.”

Will watched him warily, “What?”

“Max Griffin,” Hannibal said as the waiter approached; he handed over his card and paid as Will sat back in his chair and rubbed at his face, “you do understand I am forced to work with the man. Before he realised you still existed our relationship was very neutral, which is how I enjoyed it. Now, he keeps asking for us to attend one of his exclusive, *so I have been told*, get-togethers.”

“Exclusive,” Will chuffed out with venom, “sure, I’ll bet,” he looked up as the waiter left, seeing Hannibal’s intense stare, “oh come on, you really...why do you care?”

“I dislike being at a disadvantage,” Hannibal said, sitting back in his chair and crossing his legs, “and currently he has me at one. Also you know I can’t stand a secret.”

“It’s not even a *secret*,” Will said rolling his eyes, “and what the hell is an exclusive get-together when it’s at home?”

“If it’s not a secret then why not enlighten me?”

“Because you’ve probably figured most of it out already,” Will shrugged dismissively.

“Backhanded flattery, how intriguing,” Hannibal said with dry humour; Will raised an eyebrow and stared at Hannibal until he began the explanation Will knew would be coming, “from your distaste and his familiarity, I would hazard a guess at previous work colleague from your days in the homicide department in New Orleans?”

“No,” Will said, eyes seeming to gleam with the pleasure that Hannibal hadn’t known after all.

The suddenness and succinctness of the answer told Hannibal everything he needed to know: the game was in full swing, “Then perhaps a friend of the family?”

“No such thing,” Will said with a shrug, looking up at him through his eyelashes, “you get one more.”

The challenge managed to add a much needed sweet coating to the otherwise bitter situation. Hannibal licked at his lips and tasted the last of the chocolate there.

"Dare I say it,” he said, eyes narrowed slightly as he drummed his nails against the table once, twice, “a previous lover.”

“*No*,” Will said with wry amusement, smirking.

“May I have more time to think about it?”

“No,” Will finished his drink.

Another ring and the phone clicked through to the answering service, for the third time in a row. Taking a long breath he calmed himself, even if he was unable to quell the familiar frustrated twitch in his lip.

‘*This is Will Graham, leave a message and I’ll get back to you – BEEP’*

“Darling,” Hannibal said neutrally, “you appear to be unavailable. I merely wished to tell you that I shall be back late tonight. You might not wish to wait up. I will see you in the morning. Goodnight.”

It was almost as if he could feel Will’s stubborn dismissal through the phone’s silence. Home was becoming a prickly affair, something he did not appreciate. His house was his sanctuary from the drabness of the outside world, a small bubble of colour and energy amidst the barren plains. Now, Will sat at it’s core, desperate and fractious and angry, draining the vibrancy from his haven. Even after everything they had been through together, it still amazed Hannibal how much the man’s mood affected him, how strong their bond had become, and just how much of his waking thoughts were relegated to thinking about *making Will Graham happy.*

Recently his thoughts had been drifting towards the opposite out of habit; he wondered if there could perhaps be union in destruction. If Will could be remade in his image, then it would be through a traumatic birth. It still disquieted him that these thoughts, which normally came so naturally when he thought of transforming someone, seemed distasteful when applied to his darling. *Sour and saccharine sweet, like the taste left on the tongue after vomiting.*

Will required special care. Hannibal was simply currently at a loss as to what that could entertain. He put the phone back into his pocket and made off towards the exit.

“Ah, Doctor Lecter,” came a voice from behind him as he walked the corridor past the phlebotomy labs; on turning he was greeted with a disturbingly familiar sight, “I’m glad I caught you! You’re not headed straight home?”

Hannibal watched him, po-faced, until Griffin laughed it off.

“Sorry, I heard you on the phone and...never mind.”

“Mr Griffin,” Hannibal said, confidant that the man understood that his continued attempts to be overly familiar were having little affect, “how can I help you?”

“Thursday night,” the man said, accompanied by a possum smile, “are you and Will attending? Only I need to know numbers for the caterer. Sorry if I’m coming on too strong,” he laughed, “it’s just my wife was excited to have new blood at the house and, well, I don’t like to disappoint her.”

“Of course, I understand,” Hannibal replied; he sniffed, looking down at Griffin’s hands for a second only, noting how he rubbed his index and middle fingers against his thumb. A sudden urge of curiosity took him, mixed with a need for Will to blossom in a way that would never happen were they to continue with the status quo. He made a snap judgement, smiling, “please include us on your guest list.”

“Fantastic!” Max exclaimed, his salesman smile widening to a shark’s grin, “I’ll have an invite on your desk tomorrow morning. This is exciting, isn’t it. Hannah will be delighted. Delighted!”

“Of course,” Hannibal said carefully, “I’m afraid you will need to excuse me, I am needed at home.”

“Sure, I understand,” Griffin lifted his hands and took a couple of steps back the way he came, “tell Will I’m looking forward to a proper reunion this time.”

“I’m sure he’ll be thrilled,” Hannibal lied.

It was rather counterproductive, considering Will’s dour mood. H*e feared a depression much like the one which had come after they first learned of Will’s infertility.* This antagonistic choice was something that would, previously, have been an exciting venture. Now it was bitterly tinged with doubt, something Hannibal did not like to entertain. As he walked out the brightly lit entryway to the hospital and down into the dim car park, Hannibal wondered at the possibility of Will no longer wishing to be with him.

A sort of blind fury rested over his consciousness like a blanket, making the world seem muted and hazy.

Hannibal blinked, realising he had been standing at his car with the key in his hand, unmoving. He shook his head and unlocked the door, entering with harsher movements than

necessary. Their wish for a child was threatening the very fabric of their lives together. So many strands of time would come together in a child born of their wonderful union, and yet...

...and yet to lose Will would interfere with his plan: to have Will Graham in his life for as long as it was rational. Will was integral to maintaining his course of action; *a colourful life giving all his gifts to the only other person who could possibly appreciate them.* One day; if only this foolish notion of jeopardising their equilibrium for nothing but a biological urge could be quashed.

He was glad he had a hobby to take his mind off of things. The heater gently warmed the air, allowing him to remove his gloves and take a long breath. It was always good to unwind, after all, he thought as he pulled out and headed for the familiar route to the lonesome silos.

That there should have been more resistance let Hannibal know that Will was still playing. Not in a long lifetime would Will Graham have agreed to attend a party hosted by someone he clearly detested. And yet, it was so. They dressed for the party separately, and yet somehow Hannibal imagined that they were probably performing the same tasks at the same moments.

Pulling on socks, buttoning shirts, fiddling with cufflinks.

On emerging from the bedroom, he found Will standing against the balcony, staring down into the main hall as if lost in thought. The light from below cast his face as it would the carving on a vaulted ceiling, staring down at those below, beatific and unchangeable. His hair had been pulled dramatically to the left, leaving his forehead bare but for a rogue curl desperate to undo his efforts. As if to taunt him further, Will's silhouette was exquisite; Hannibal recognised the clothes at a glance. The blue silk shirt he had purchased for Will's birthday, which the man never wore, coated in a grey suit that matched his eyes, all wrapped up in the light grey woollen overcoat Hannibal had bought him when Will seemed adamant to refuse proper winter attire further than a series of parkas.

On approaching, the statuesque quality was broken as Will looked up to his left. A moment of silence, then a hand reached out and ran over the lapel of Hannibal's suit, curving fingers tugging at the material gently with finger and thumb. He had chosen the pearlescent blue ensemble for its associative memories more than its visual style. Mixing it with an ochre shirt and cream and rose gold paisley tie was his act of rebellion against pure sentimentality.

"Been a while since you've worn that," Will commented, "I've always loved that colour."

"I would say the same of you, but I feel I would be lying considering it's never been out of the closet," Hannibal reached out, stopping just short of Will's chest, "may I?"

"If you have to ask..." Will said, causing a flash of remembrance; *their first encounter, burning and desperate and gentle.* As Hannibal's hand slipped inside his coat Will looked away to his right. The light from below caught the flush.

“Ah, nothing quite compares to the produce of the mulberry silkworm,” Hannibal said, running his fingers up across Will’s clavicle before retreating, “special occasion?”

“Not sure yet,” Will shrugged as he pulled his overcoat closed and buttoned it, clearing his throat, “I’ll have to think about it.”

“As will I, it seems,” Hannibal said, garnering a quick and intense stare; Will was the first to look away, “you are sure you wish to attend?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?” Will asked.

“Yes, why wouldn’t you be,” Hannibal said; Will simply raised a brow and cocked his elbow out, leaving a gap for Hannibal to slide his arm through.

They walked down the stairs arm in arm.

The house was gaudy, only in as much as it was a perfect encapsulation of social climbing. It appeared, or so Hannibal assumed, to have once been a respectable two storey, two bedroom with ample garden space. Now it had grown tumours of conservatories, twin garage and extended loft space, all obvious new attachments. As they pulled into the expanded driveway, eating greedily into the lawn, Hannibal set his Bentley next to a cluster of Audis and Volvos, middle of the range cars trying their best to be eye-catching. The house vindicated all that he had guessed about Max Griffin; an antsy alpha with no real standing, clawing his way devilishly higher and higher, uncaring of whether it left corpses in his wake or not.

Hannibal was smiling to himself even before they had reached the front door.

“You made it!” they were greeted by a flashy smile and the sounds of conversation and music spilling out from within; Griffin seemed to have chosen a rather grasping well fitted navy blue suit, but was let down by a liquorice striped white shirt and garish red tie. The combination was nauseating, “come in, please, welcome.”

They were faced with a series of white walls, the house having been knocked through into an open plan: a large living room before them and the load bearing wall to the left partially hiding the kitchen. A stubby corridor to his immediate left seemed to lead to a set of stairs and a door he presumed was a bathroom. Each wall was adorned with tasteful but meaningless art, *a jumble of free falling picture frames all clustered together into a mosaic creating a bizarre centrepiece to the main wall, three piecemeal watercolours, a Kandinsky*. The suite was cream leather, the fireplace marble, and the television wall mounted. The lack of cohesion made his skin itch. On seeing through the fully French windowed back wall and noting the small pool there, Hannibal congratulated himself on not laughing outright.

“You have a lovely home,” he lied instead, taking off his overcoat and scarf; *well aware that Will was staying close-by, while Griffin couldn’t take his eyes off of his husband*, “is there somewhere I might..?”

“Oh, here, I’ll take those,” Griffin said, collecting their coats into eager hands, “you brought a bottle, that’s so kind. You can just pop it in the kitchen.”

It was like a pantomime: *ridiculous, farcical, hints of underlying danger and deception*. Hannibal decided to introduce himself into the ruse and see what played out. Will, still silent, followed behind him. A gaggle of three women and one man stood by a table which held wine glasses and beer bottles stuffed into a bucket of ice. As they approached one turned, a mousey looking woman who only came up to his shoulder, sporting wide blue eyes and a small mouth which gave her a look of being perpetually startled.

“Good evening, I believe the host is busy with our coats,” he said with a welcoming smile as he extended his hand; she took it with a shy laugh, “my name is Hannibal, I work at St James. This is my husband, Will.”

“It’s lovely to meet you both,” she said sweetly, *and Hannibal did not miss the rather odd look she gave Will as she shook his hand*, “I’m Hannah Griffin, Max’s wife. This is...”

The part continued in a litany of names, sub par drinks, awful conversation and the little assemblage of bankers, other lawyers, university professors and other middling professionals all doing their best to one up each other in the most trite fashion. It took a moment to realise, but he thought they might be trying to impress him; *the need to laugh resurged, hidden behind a sip of the wine he had brought, the only thing worth drinking.*

Still not enough so far to tell him exactly why Will had only said a handful of words since their arrival. Not that Will was particularly chatty in social situations, but normally he could stand to be polite for Hannibal’s sake. Instead he was cagey, eyes flitting over the situation as if absorbing every little detail and not liking what he found.

When the host decided that it was a little stuffy inside the house, and maybe they could retire to the firepit outside, Will saw his opportunity to see if all of this was justified. At first he hadn’t wanted to know, because he was sure he was right and that never led to savoury places. Then Hannibal had begun asking about the reason for Will’s dislike, and the party, and it would be easy to see because...

...because when he’d met Max Griffin in that tiny room, deep inside the hospital, the look in his eyes had been disgustingly familiar. When he’d been seventeen he’d yet to fully understand that look, know it for all of it’s in’s-and-out’s. But now, years of looking into the eyes of psychopaths had allowed him to thin slice it down to a look .

“Excuse me for a moment,” he said with a small smile, heading towards the bathroom; only on reaching the door, he instead turned right and headed up the stairs.

The house seemed sterile to him, as if the person who had decorated had no personality whatsoever. Will guessed they’d hired someone, because he was sure Griffin’s ego complex would have had more pictures of himself and his accomplishments lining the walls, instead of

wedding and holiday snaps. Everything here was a mask, a pretence, from the fake sentimentality to the false understanding of class.

He remembered how wealthy Griffin's mother and grandfather had dressed, the gleaming Aston Martin they'd arrived in, the fine school they'd sent their son to. And now here was Max, in his cloying little two-bed, throwing influential parties to try and claw back some of that glory. Which meant he'd probably been disowned, *Will would guess for something really unsavoury, as old-wealth families didn't disown their kids for anything trivial, especially a family of lawyers.* Probably assault ending in death, maybe rape.

The bedroom was easy to find and, because Max was clearly not very imaginative, so were the things he suspected he'd find.

Third drawer down in the large dresser, underneath a layer of shirts, lay a layer of toys: *handcuffs, rope, gags, leather masks.* Enough that it could be a kink, but *just* enough that Will felt justified in calling it a fetish. He wondered just what sort of life he'd narrowly avoided by not marrying Maxwell Griffin.

"What are you doing in here?" came the soft voice from the doorway.

Will turned, not bothering to close the drawer, to find Hannah Griffin standing just inside the room. Her face was a picture of mortified anger, unable to take her eyes from the display. He was unsure what to say, and he felt for her, he did, so when she repeated the question, "What are you *doing* in here!" and stepped forwards to hurriedly hide away the telling collection, Will caught hold of her. She gasped, struggling, frowning, mouth open, her face a mixture of fear and shame.

The dress she wore had seemed overly frumpy. He thought that as soon as he laid eyes on her. A long sleeved cream gown with a ring neck, up around the clavicle with a fountain spray of lace at the neck. It trailed the floor. Either Griffin was excessively jealous, or…

She flinched and batted him away when he tried to peel back her right sleeve, but he'd already seen enough; *black bruises upon brown upon yellow.* Nothing that handcuffs alone could cause, he'd done enough in depth research into varying types and causes of ecchymosis in his career to know finger marks when he saw them.

"Consensual?" he asked, voice soft as steel as he let her go.

"I don't want you in here," she said, voice shaking, "this isn't fair."

Nothing was, he felt like telling her, but it was too cruel. Instead he tried to break through gently.

"I haven't been gone long enough for you to come looking for me," Will noted, hands in his pockets, "and I wasn't making enough sound for you to know exactly where I was...you followed me."

"I don't-I..." she took a breath, rubbing unconsciously at her wrists. Screwing her eyes and mouth shut she took a short breath, opening them to stare at him, "he won't stop talking about

you, for weeks now. I hoped you just wouldn't come but...I'm scared he's going to do something. I wanted to-to tell you that you should leave."

"It's not me I'm worried about," Will said sternly.

"*Please* just go?" she pleaded, "Please, I don't want anything else to happen. *Please*."

It grated against his moral conscience, but right now all he could do was what she asked. It was none of his business, after all, and what judge in Baltimore would convict and alpha for having sex with his bonded omega, regardless of the consent? He'd seen enough cases be dismissed before they'd even hit the bar, never mind convictions, he'd seen omegas unwilling to admit to the abuse at all, he'd seen cases thrown out because of botched evidence and police procedure. Too many factors to ensure her that he could make it all stop and not end up the hypocrite.

He lifted a jaded hand, gesturing for her to leave first. She she hitched her dress and fled through the door. Will closed the drawer, chewing at the inside of his bottom lip.

The sound of the door closing behind him, however, made him stand up straight.

"I didn't take you for a snooper," Griffin's tone was just as he remembered it, *not the subservient, obsequious tone he'd been using all night. Instead now the self-assured, arrogant predator was speaking*.

"And I'd say I didn't take you for a rapist," Will shrugged, noting Griffin bristle at the accusation, "but I'd be lying."

"Just as cock-sure as ever, huh?" he shook his head, licking his bottom lip into his mouth and scratching at his neck; Will felt a little trapped with Griffin between himself and the door, "I suppose I should have known. The moment I saw you again, after all those *years*, knew you hadn't changed a bit."

"That makes two of us."

And he should have left. He should have taken Hannah's advice and made for the door and never looked back, he was sure Max wouldn't have dared to try anything had he just left, right there and then. Not that good advice was anything he had ever fallen prey to.

"I see you never passed Yale," he said instead, digging into what was surely an old wound if the hardening of Max' face was anything to go by, "A crawling little scab like you would surely have been higher on the rungs by now than a senior medical malpractice lawyer if you'd started at a firm when you were twenty."

"How dare you, in my own house?" Max said tightly, despite his smile.

"What did you do? Beat someone up? Sleep with someone's mate?" A twitch by his left eye, "Oh? Was it worse than just that? Christ, no wonder they disowned you."

"Just you keep your fucking mouth shut," Griffin said, harsh but controlled.

“Is that what you say to your wife?” Will jabbed back, voice like steel.

Watched by eyes alight with fury, Will walked for the door. He had expected another snide remark, maybe a hand reaching out to stop him. Not a hand at the back of his neck with enough force to slam him up against the door before he could open it, and another at his left wrist, hauling it painfully up his back until it struggled not to snap, the weight of the other man’s body pressing in against him, keeping him tight against the wood.

Hadn’t expected that he wouldn’t be able to move, not just for fear of pain, but from the sudden, cloying, overwhelming memories assaulting him*; Hannibal holding him down against the bed, heedless of his words, pleading, unable to comprehend what was happening.* It sucked the air from his lungs, paralysed his limbs, made his blood rush and rush and rush until he began to feel faint from it. He felt breath by his ear and closed his eyes.

“Fuck you, you piece of *shit*,” Griffin spat, “think you’re so much better than me, but you’re just like every other little bitch omega. Crumble soon as you apply a little pressure,” he twisted a little harder and Will couldn’t stop the swallowed cry of pain, “Huh, *like* this do you? You fucking do, don’t you. What a fucking hypocrite. Wouldn’t even let me touch you, yet you’ll let that rich faggot downstairs pork you in the ass, that it? You *ruined* me, Graham! You ruined my fucking life with that fucking stunt, after that everything I did was scrutinised, *watched* like a psycho, and all for the sake of what? That I wasn’t good enough for you?” the adrenaline in his bloodstream peaked, just as Griffin laved the shell of his ear with his tongue and ground out, “Fuck I’ve dreamed about this for so long.”

It happened so fast that it took Will a moment to process. His right hand had moved almost involuntarily, swinging down and in between them, grabbing the obvious erection pressed against his back and crushing as hard as he could. Max ground out a yell through his teeth, hands leaving Will’s neck and arm to fumble furiously to free himself from the agony between his legs. Will lifted his knee and pushed backward against the door, forcing Max to stumble and fall to the floor.

He was out the door and down the stairs before he truly took stock of where he was. Through the blood rushing in his ears he could hear talking, see everyone still outside by the pool. Upstairs he could hear the door open. It was blind instinct to head for the group, taking long, slow breaths as he did. He had a lifetime’s worth of hiding his emotions to call upon, enough that by the time he reached the outside he was sure he didn’t look as suspicious as he felt to those who sat there.

All except two. Hannibal stood and walked to his side as the group laughed at the ending to some joke or other, while Hannah watched him with her wide eyes, blank faced.

“I’m not feeling well,” he said quietly as Hannibal touched his shoulder.

“I see,” Hannibal nodded, “let me fetch our coats.”

“I’ll come with you,” Will said as Hannibal walked into the house.

“Here,” Hannibal said as he fished out his keys from his pocket, “why don’t you wait in the car? I will make our excuses.”

The drive home was quiet. Will stared out into the passing darkness, rolling past like a mirror as he watched his vague reflection in the glass. The adrenaline had drained him, leaving him shaky and tired. It was easy to pull off illness, enough that Hannibal did not bother him until Will, closing his eyes, fell asleep.

It was difficult because there was no way to ask. Only to infer, if the game was to be kept sacrosanct. Relying on hints and clues, that was how the game worked. If he were to come outright and ask, it wouldn't be fun any more.

And yet...it was difficult.

The car journey home from the unassuming house of Max Griffin had told him only half of a story; the unsavoury half. *Will reeked of the man at his neck, his wrists, his back.* The story concocted of a sudden illness was believable, if Will's pallor and sudden exhaustion were anything to go by, and yet there had been no sign of it when they arrived. He'd been so tired that Hannibal had to help him inside on arriving home. Once Will was in bed, asleep, Hannibal found himself standing in the middle of his living room, livid.

His upper lip twitched as he drew his teeth over his tongue, eyes closed. It took longer than usual to calm himself to a state in which he could be entirely rational, but then his biology was urging him to drive back now, break in and stick a blade up into Griffin's ribs. Instead he took a breath, long and slow, and thought.

Thought through the night, calculating what had occurred. After taking stock of everything useful, *including entry and exit points which were least likely to be attached to an alarm system*, he came to a unique conclusion which had come through omission rather than fact.

Will had said nothing. Hannibal, sitting alone in the dark, sniffed and rubbed his chill fingers together. If it had been something Will was not willing to handle he would have said something straight away, Hannibal was sure. And yet Will had said nothing of what had happened. Whatever that was.

"How unfortunate," Hannibal said, grimacing as he blew into his cupped hands and stood, heading to the kitchen to make himself a hot drink, "how unfortunate."

Over the next two weeks Hannibal was forced, or rather forced himself, not to interfere. It was torturous, unequivocally, and yet the thrill of it was utterly new. This bizarre circumstance, all stemming from some forgotten paperwork, had allowed him something that he had never thought he would be allowed to see. He would remember to thank Griffin, when he had the chance, before the man met his fate.

Will Graham was on the hunt.

"Shall we meet for lunch, darling?" he had asked, a few days after their visit to the Griffin residence; Will had been recovering at home, and Hannibal had been desperate to salvage as much information as possible.

“No, that’s alright, don’t come all the way back home just for me,” Will had said too casually, “I’m busy anyway.”

Will had never passed up on a chance to see him during the day. Regardless of their arguments and their disagreements, Will would rather have him there and ignore him than not see him at all. And then, two days later:

“Who was calling?” Hannibal asked, pausing his fingers over the harpsichord as Will wandered into the room, noting something down on a pad in his left hand; Will looked up, glasses masking his eyes, “On the phone?”

“No one,” Will shrugged, “wrong number.”

Yet between the time the phone rang and Will’s voice had stopped talking, it had very much not been a wrong number.

And then another couple of days later, Will had passed up another lunch date and Hannibal had arbitrarily decided that following him was not breaking the accord of the game. Tracking his phone had been simple, leading Hannibal’s taxi to the town centre and finding Will’s Ford truck parked on the street. It had taken a good thirteen minutes, but in the end he had managed it. Standing by the line of bushes and flowers put out along the line of cafes, Hannibal spied Will sitting at a table with Hannah Griffin talking seriously over coffee, and smiled to himself.

He called a cab and went home without a fuss.

The banging had started at nine o’clock on the last Saturday in February. It was snowing, Will remembered that specifically because he’d had to put fleece blankets over some of the early flowering plants in the garden that had been lured out by warmer than normal weather.

Will had been loading the dishwasher when the thumping at the door started. Licking his lips, he brushed his damp hands against his shirt and headed for the door. *It had taken less time than he’d anticipated, he hadn’t given Hannah enough credit.*

He had left Hannibal in the sitting room, leafing through his copy of *Larousse’s Gastronomique,* and now he could hear feet moving upstairs. Will waited until he heard Hannibal’s footsteps on the upper landing and the sound of a voice on the phone before opening the door.

He also remembered it was snowing that day because Max Griffin was covered in it as he stood on their doorstep, eyes dark and hair wet. He looked like someone had dragged him out of a grave, face sweaty and clothes wrinkled. Will had only enough time to notice this and smile, before Griffin lunged at him.

“*You*...” the man growled out as Will caught his hands by the wrists and managed to hold him at bay, “you fucking stole my *wife*!”

The struggle only lasted a few seconds before Hannibal stepped up behind Griffin, slid his arm around the man's neck until his elbow was at his artery, and squeezed. Griffin let go of Will, choking, and scrabbled with his hands at Hannibal's now damp shirt.

"Okay, *okay,"* he choked out, gurgling most of it; Will looked to Hannibal, took a long breath, and nodded. Hannibal lessened his grip, only slightly.

"I do believe you have broken into my home, Mr Griffin," Hannibal said, "and assaulted my husband."

"You don't understand, he's a fucking liar, he's *cheating* you!" Griffin said, hauling in gasps of air, "Aren't you Graham you snake! You lie to everyone to get what you want. He's a fucking Jackal!"

"O-oh," Hannibal raised his brows and smiled, "well this is very educational."

It was infectious, and Will couldn't help but return it. This time the adrenaline was smooth and sleek, making him overly aware but not enough to shake, not enough to feel the nausea. Just enough to feel recklessly in control. When he reached into his pocket for the flick knife Hannibal watched his every move but said nothing.

For a moment Griffin looked scared, then confused as Will held it by the blade, and then agitatedly excited as Will handed it to the man.

"Let him go," he said to Hannibal.

A moment's hesitation, in which Hannibal stared at him inscrutably. There was a keen intelligence there, trying its best to fathom the motive. *The understanding he had always craved.* Will felt his heart beat double time as Hannibal, seemingly mollified, did as he was told. Then Max Griffin was before him with a knife, eyes flicking around him as Hannibal stood back. Time slowed down to blink speed, yet it still wasn't enough to stop the man before him, fuming and grinning, to lift the knife gripped in his fist and stab down at him with all he could seemingly muster.

The pain started in his hands, *as he lifted his arms across his face to defend himself the blade skipped across the backs of his hands,* and ended at his shoulder, *the blade found its target squarely in his deltoid.* He could hear the sirens growing closer, but didn't entirely register the pain. Enough that he could enjoy the panic on Griffin's face as he dropped the knife, eyes flicking back and forth between himself and Hannibal, who had rushed to his side.

"You set me up," Griffin was shouting as the police careened into the driveway, sirens blaring, "you *fucking set me up.* He set me up!" he continued yelling as the police, guns drawn as they told him to *put his hands on his head and get down on the ground*, "It's a fucking set up, Graham set me up!"

"You know I hate hospitals," Will said, wincing as Hannibal continued his careful stitches, "couldn't we have just done this at home?"

He wished to tell his husband that he was lucky he only needed minor triage, rather than surgery. The hospital had been as accommodating as he expected them to be for the head of surgery, allowing them a bed where Will could recuperate while Hannibal treated his wounds. And yet still it had been difficult to deal with Will's flippant attitude.

"I want you to be somewhere with readily available intravenous fluids, if not you will suffer badly from the shock," Hannibal said, feeding the thin line through again making Will close his eyes tightly, "I would like you to take the local anaesthetic, darling."

"No thanks," Will said softly, taking a long breath as Hannibal tied off the stitches; Once he was done, Will put his chin to his chest and peered down at the neat line of seven little stitches, then to the six on the back of his right hand, "it's not that bad."

"Of course," Hannibal said, very much aware of how close he had come to facing the consequences of indulging Will's need for justice, "whatever you wish."

The green curtain around them was pulled back by a blonde policewoman, holding her cap, her black uniform stark against the pale green. She smiled at him before nodding to Hannibal.

"Sorry to interrupt you Dr. Lecter, but we're ready for your statement now. I'll need you to accompany me to the station, there are some other things to take care of there. My partner James will stay and take Mr. Graham's statement."

"I understand," Hannibal said, turning to Will, "you will be alright?"

"I'll be alright," Will nodded, swallowing; as Hannibal made to stand, Will grabbed his hand, wincing at the pain the movement caused, "Hannibal?"

"Yes, darling?"

"Thanks."

The word held an unspeakable undertone of understanding, the likes of which Hannibal had not thought possible. Not for him.

"You need never thank me," he said, leaning in to kiss Will lightly on the temple; out the corner of his eye he saw the policewoman look down, smiling softly.

His beautiful darling, lying prone amongst such savagery like a resting viper. He listened to the murmuring of the police radio as Officer Daniels drove him to the station. It was astonishing, really. How had he ended up with such a miraculous creature coiled around his life. He wondered if Will were to squeeze too tightly, would everything asphyxiate, crushing blue and purple until neither of them could survive?

Will was capable of the same level of destruction he himself could cause, only without a single line of physical harm; it fascinated him. Will had managed to dissect Max Griffin at a glance, by running his eyes over the man's home, and then set about tearing the man's life in two by pushing all the right buttons; *encouraging the wife to leave, knowing Griffin was too unstable not to come seeking personal revenge, and knowing that a B&E charge wasn't*

enough to put a man like that away. Letting him take a knife to his flesh so that Griffin would go away for serious time rather than weasel out of it all with community service. Baltimore judges looked unfavourably on those who harmed defenceless omegas.

He sat back and smiled softly, closing his eyes.

He had made up his mind. Now it was all a matter of preparation.

'*Hey,'* a feeling of rocking, as if on a ship at sea, '*are you awake? Hannibal?'*

Opening his eyes was a chore. His mouth felt dry and tacky, and his arms were cold. Hannibal wished to crawl back under the covers and fall back to sleep, but the hand shaking him gently by the shoulder would not allow it. He sighed through his nose, rolling onto his back. Above him Will's face slid into view, lit with the gentle glow of the sunrise.

"I've drawn you a bath, come on," was all he said before leaving his field of vision; Hannibal rolled his head to the left and watched as Will walked out of the room, with the clear expectation that Hannibal was to follow.

Closing his eyes, he licked his lips and grimaced at the taste. His limbs ached from the night before, but then it had been hard work. Some people just didn't know when they were beaten, and yet last night the pig of a medical examiner had squirmed like a worm on a hook. Had made him work for it. Hannibal made a mental note to perhaps start swimming three times a week instead of two. His stamina needed work.

Still.

Sitting up caused aching muscles to pull and the bruise at his ankle to twinge. He slipped carefully from the bed and stretched, feeling the chill air invade every inch of his naked body, making the hairs rise in a vain attempt to trap the heat. The house was waking slowly to the sunlight, casting everything in an enjoyable rosy gold. Pushing open the bathroom let out a flood of warmth. He slipped inside and closed the door, loathe to lose an inch of the steamy caress against his skin. Will was busy pulling towels out of the hamper, picking up one and walking past him out of the door without an explanation.

Hannibal felt a little underappreciated, but the bath before him was too inviting to pass up. By the time Will returned he was already submerged, relishing the work the burning waters were doing. *Melting away.* He could hear Will walking around him through the booming in the water, muting the steps and yet echoing their path. Sitting up brought the sounds of the world back as the water drained from his ears, tapping down into the bath from his hair like rain.

Hannibal rubbed at his face and sniffed. He did not flinch when he felt a hand upon his head and the chill spill of shampoo against his scalp. The feeling was blissful; with every caress of fingers on his scalp the lancing pain at the top of his spine melted to a dull ache. The herbal scent tickled at his nose, making him smile. Soon, Will appeared to decide his hair was clean, and began rinsing away the suds with a jug, letting them slide down to float island-like upon the water.

Next a hand reached under the surface to retrieve his own, pulling his arm free. His skin steamed in the warm air. There was a slick smacking sound as liquid soap was rubbed briskly between fingers. He watched as Will applied it generously to his arm, rubbing down towards his hand, caressing his palm with warm, gentle fingers. Hannibal looked upwards, staring at the face of his darling.

Will said nothing, but then Hannibal knew he did not have to.

Then the other arm. His feet and lower legs. He was encouraged to sit up so as to wash his back and chest. It continued until all that could be reached had been intricately cleaned. At a pause in the attention, Hannibal reached up to cup Will's face with a warm, wet palm and kiss his cheek softly. It wasn't a surprise when Will allowed Hannibal to gently pull him into the water, despite his state of dress. With a voluminous wave the water overflowed, spilling to the floor in a monsoon against the tile. The feel of soaking cotton against his thighs and chest was bizarrely pleasant.

The kiss was fraught with tension at first, and then slowly but surely it dissolved. Became a sensual form of need. Breaking apart, Will buried his face in Hannibal's neck. They lay together, silent but for the sound of water dripping to the floor.

To the sound of nothing but sloshing water and fingers moving against his chest, Hannibal allowed Will his silent apology.

"I'll stop," the words were murmured against his throat, "if...if we need to, then I'll stop."

"It is everything you want, darling," Hannibal said, lifting an arm through the sucking water to pat Will's damp hair, "I would not deny you that. And yet..."

"I know. I know, I..." Will sighed, "it's just taken a little time, to accept. I get it. If it happens, then it happens. No more hormone therapy."

The silence resumed. Outside the sun strengthened, raising the gold to a shimmering pale yellow. Hannibal tried not to fall asleep, enveloped as he was by such warmth.

"May I ask," he said softly, "what brought this on?"

No answer was forthcoming. Hannibal swallowed, long and slow, and let out a breath, "Was this anything to do with that unpleasant affair with Griffin?"

"That was weeks ago."

"And yet it still seems to linger."

"I don't give a rat's ass about Max Griffin," Will said truthfully, "I...I care about you. I don't want to throw away everything I have for some crazy pipe dream, ok? You happy?"

"Only when you are."

A laugh puffed against his neck, followed by a soft kiss.

“If it happens, it happens,” Will repeated, as if trying to convince himself, “I’ve heard of weirder things.”

“I fear we both have,” Hannibal smiled, “you becoming pregnant without help would probably not even break the top ten.”

“Wow, I’m flattered,” Will said wryly as Hannibal began running his hand under his shirt; Will groaned happily as Hannibal’s fingers found a sweet spot, “this was all just an elaborate ruse to get me out of my clothes, wasn’t it?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Hannibal said innocently.

Moving backwards.

Time slipping away.

His voice, Will’s voice, back through his life.

Back through university, school.

His Mother’s voice, his Father’s voice.

Back to the day he was reborn.

Everything moved at a fraction of time, slow and steady. Feeling the snow fall against his fingers, little dissolving crystals. Slipping fractions, crackling against the movement of the world itself. It was impossible to stretch the molecules far enough to understand what came before.

That time was lost now; shut away, box-safe.

“If you’re going out,” Will said quietly, hand over the mouth of the phone as Hannibal’s hand rested on the door, “could you get some orange juice? And we need butter for tonight.”

“Of course, darling,” he smiled, “I shall be about a couple of hours.”

Will nodded, continuing his talk with Alana. Her excited voice flowed from the phone like a trumpet hailing the return of a lost hero. It was difficult, sometimes, to trace people’s motivations back to their source. Alana, dreading a child and yet now ecstatic on hearing of the pregnancy, still bitter and jealous but unable to hide her true happiness.

As he drove he wondered what the motivations of his life had been. Was this the inevitable conclusion, or had he built it stone by stone? His wall was multifaceted, and yet in the end it was nothing but a wall that intersected many others. In the end there was nothing special about life itself, but what it became, what it could become. He stopped at the gates and called ahead, wondering absently on the future of his child, and the link to their past.

As he reached the Lecter estate the gates opened before him, but did not understand it would be for the last time. The exquisite grounds trailed by, grasped in Winter still, cold and wraith like. He found her standing at the top of the steps, awaiting him.

He kissed her cheeks, once, twice, three times.

“You should have called ahead,” she said, “your uncle would have liked to see you.”

“No,” he shook his head and smiled knowingly, “he wouldn’t. But then we both know that.”

Her lack of reaction showed her shock; the unspoken words between them, the reason his uncle had barely spoken a word to him since he was twenty one. *Another set of stretched moments, spanning an unknown amount of time in which she had loved him and he had enjoyed her company, a time that still spread out now, forever.* Even when he had visited with Will, his uncle had managed to make excuses not to be at home. Hannibal did not care, but he could understand it was difficult to be cuckolded by your own flesh and blood.

“Baasan, I need to discuss something important,” he said, reaching out to take her hand, “may we?”

She had nodded in reply, as if it were all she were capable of. The hallways echoed with their footsteps, falling in and out of synchronicity. Time was flexing and tearing, ready to build something anew. Outside the sun moved overhead, casting long shadows through statues and houseplants, over painted faces as if to give them the facsimile of life.

When they reached her hobby room, with its tall windows and minimalist furniture, Hannibal gravitated towards her work. Painted streaks of ink that wound across the page, like animals tearing at each other. He reached out and touched it gently; dry.

“You sounded very serious,” she said, trying for composure as she began tidying up a small painting set that was yet to be washed, “I hope nothing is wrong.”

“No,” he shook his head and walked to the windows, staring out at the gardens; *walking there as a young man, noting the Latin names of the plants and flowers to pass the time as he waited for news of those who would hear his sister’s name in their dying moments,* “for once I come with good news. I am to be a father.”

She juddered to a halt, causing her to drop a small ink pot. They both watched it fall, the glass top ejecting at speed. She hurried to pick it up, grabbing a wad of blotting paper to try and stem the mess. It was a significant amount of time before she spoke. Hannibal simply watched her, waiting.

“What would you like me to say?” she finally offered.

“I hear that congratulations is a favourite of gushing aunts,” Hannibal sat down on the chaise longue, “but then you never were.”

“You know how I feel. I don’t know why you continue to delude yourself, thinking this will end in anything but tragedy.”

“My life is not a cliché, Murasaki,” he said, looking up at her with an open expression; she seemed to take badly to hearing her given name, “I simply thought it courteous to bid you farewell in person. A phone call is so impersonal.”

“You’re going,” she said, suddenly, desperately, “where?”

“Abroad,” he said vaguely, “it will be necessary, once Will knows.”

“Hannibal, what are you talking about?” she asked as if she already knew, but was unwilling to believe the words.

“Well, since Will and I are about to create something extraordinary, I thought it prudent that he know,” he watched her, “everything.”

“Everything,” she repeated.

“Everything,” Hannibal nodded, “Will deserves to know the truth. Part of him already knows, the other part of him merely wishes to ignore it. He is...an exceptionally gifted man. You always taught me that it was only gentlemanly to share my gifts.”

"This man will betray you...”

“Will understands,” Hannibal cut her off, “well enough already. I truly believe that this revelation will simply...make sense of the last of the mystery. The Chesapeake Ripper is his white whale, if Ahab were to have learned to swim.”

“You cannot see the future, none of us can,” she said suddenly, panicked, “what will you do if you are simply lighting the fire beneath all of our feet?”

Smiling seemed to unnerve her further. She clutched the mottled wad of ink stained paper in her hand so tightly that it shook. When Hannibal stood and approached her, she backed up a step involuntarily.

“I would never hurt him, if that is your worry,” Hannibal said truthfully; the space between himself and Murasaki seemed as a constant, and Hannibal understood that the distance would be perpetual. There was no room to move closer, not now, “as I said, I thought it only fair to say goodbye in person. We will be leaving in a couple of days. I mean not to return to America for the foreseeable future.”

“I see,” she nodded, breathing the words out rather than projecting them with any force; when she looked to the jumble of objects in her arms she frowned, “it was inevitable, I see that now.”

“Everything is inevitable, baasan,” Hannibal said, walking to the door and placing his hand on the door knob, “or the world would be swallowed by inertia, time would cease to flow and the only route we could follow would be back to where we started.”

“If it could would it make a difference? Would anything change?” she whispered, refusing to look at him.

He watched her with the same expression he used for everyone else, opened the door and simply left her there with the question hanging between them, never to be answered.

The light above his desk was flickering again. With a weary sigh, Jack Crawford picked up his phone and crankily called maintenance.

“Yes, I know you just sent someone up yesterday,” he said, looking up as someone knocked and entered; his secretary, Jonathan, stood half behind the door, looking urgent, “maybe the next guy you send could actually fix the damn problem. Then I’d never have to call and harass you ever again, yes, thanks, thanks – Christ. Yes, Jonathan, what is it?”

“Lady Lecter is here,” Jonathan said significantly, “she’s waiting outside.”

“Outside,” Jack said, frowning, “Lady Murasaki Lecter? Well show her in.”

“No, sorry Sir, I mean she’s outside the building. In her car. She sent a messenger up to ask you if you would go down to her,” Jonathan lifted both hands in the air when Jack began looking fed up of the explanation, “she said it was urgent.”

“Hell if I know why I gotta jump every time some rich fucker says jump,” Jack sighed, “alright. Alright, I’ll be down in a second. Best not mention this to anyone, alright? If anyone calls for me, I’m in the john.”

Since his last run in with Hannibal, Lecter had become one of his least favourite words. No alpha liked being put in his place, and Jack was no different. The loss of Will from his team had been catastrophic for the department. Solved violent offender cases were down, the time it took to solve those that they did was up. His field scientists were tetchy and fed up; he seriously thought Beverly Katz was thinking of up and leaving, which at this point would just be the cherry on the goddamn cake.

And now this. He scanned himself out and walked to the car park. There, under the two cherry trees that grew by the entrance, sat an out of place black SUV which seemed a pretty good bet was the car he wanted. He couldn’t help but laugh a little at the absurdity of the situation. As he reached the car he knocked on the window.

“Lady Murasaki?” he asked as the window descended, trying on his best fake polite voice, “it’s wonderful to see you, how is..?”

All that emerged was a thick manilla envelope, held by a gloved hand. Jack frowned, taking it on instinct. Inside he could see that it was not her, instead there was a young man in a white suit; the driver’s cabin was separate and hidden behind clouded glass.

“What the hell is this?” Jack asked, his right hand going to his gun, “Who the hell are you?”

“Listen to my instructions, or the consequences will be immediate,” the young man said, his accent slightly Scandinavian, “in your hand is enough evidence to lead you to your goal. You

have two days, after which it will be too late. If Lady Murasaki or the Lecter household is implicated, then your evidence will be forfeit. If Lady Murasaki faces any charges, then the evidence will be forfeit."

"Hey, I don't appreciate you jerking me around here kid..."

"Do you understand and agree to the terms?"

"I don't even know what the hell this is all..." Jack said, pulling open the folder and yanking out a handful of photographs and letters; his words stalled in his throat, eyes widening.

"Do you understand and agree to the terms?" the man repeated.

Jack found himself nodding as the bitter winter wind ruffled the pictures. It seemed to be all the acknowledgement that the man needed, as the next he knew the car was speeding out onto the road. He watched it leave, unable to even try and believe that he would trace the number plate.

On returning to his office he stopped at Jonathan's desk.

"Have you told anyone Murasaki sent a messenger up here?"

"Sorry sir?" Jonathan asked, looking taken aback, "Are you ok?"

"Have you *told* anyone?" Jack hissed.

"No," he blurted out.

"Good. Good. Keep it that way if you value that ass you're sitting on. Understand me?

"Yes, I do," Jonathan said, looking shaken.

"Hold my calls. Hold everything. Get Katz, Zeller and Price to my office, ASAP."

He closed the door behind him and marched to his desk, sweeping everything down onto the floor. The contents of the manilla folder were emptied out carefully in a mosaic of paper and glossy photographs. *Exquisitely detailed sketches of the crime scenes, victims, photographs of an old barn by some silos, letters detailing important things never released to the press, irrefutable proof of the unobtainable.*

There, in the centre of the mass, a photograph of a face that seemed beyond comprehension, that seemed to mock him with its superiority, despite its static state. Jack sat down roughly, rubbing at his mouth and shaking.

For the first time in his life, the face of the Chesapeake Ripper stared right back at him.

For the first time in his life, he wished he'd never known.

Two days later, Hannibal Lecter returned home in the late afternoon. In his bag sat a parcel of Euros, for the journey, alongside a list of everything he had waiting at the airport lockers. It would be easier, he thought, to have less preparation necessary. He was unsure exactly how Will would react, but it was not outwith the realms of possibility that it could be quite inflammatory. Packing for a new life in France was surely not something he would wish to think about.

As he walked up the steps to his house he could hear the clunk and clatter of movement from within. *He would admit that missing this house was a possibility; it held such a plethora of memories for him. And now for Will.* Still.

"Hey, you're home early," Will said from the bottom of the stairs as he continued picking up some fallen utensils, *paint brushes, paint cans, rollers and trays*, "trust you to ruin the surprise."

"Oh?" Hannibal said, pocketing his keys, "I am sure I'll pay for it," on reaching Will he leaned down to kiss him softly, "there is something I need to talk to you about, darling. Something I must tell you."

"Well we've all got our own set of secrets today, huh?" Will said with a smile as he leaned down to grab two paint cans, "Can I do mine first? Come on."

Hannibal smiled as he watched Will ascend the stairs, looking as happy as he'd seen him in a long time. By the time he followed, Will was already talking. The words drifted down like falling leaves.

"I know you wanted it for an office because of the afternoon light, but I kind of vetoed that without a vote. So, I moved the furniture out to the sitting room just now..."

"Is that wise, darling?"

"Christ Hannibal, I'm three weeks pregnant, not three months. I can move some furniture around without my insides imploding. Anyway, I need to replace the curtains and I really want some new carpet in, but then I thought, well, I'm painting it anyway so it makes sense to do that afterwards."

By the time Will took a breath to speak, Hannibal was standing next to him, jacket over his arm, looking into the now emptied spare room, flitting with sunlight through the whispering branches of the swaying trees beyond the windows.

"A nursery," Will said, grinning, "don't you think? It's perfect."

It was, Hannibal thought as he observed the world around him, he could not agree further. Will seemed to take his silence as affirmation.

"I just need to find a colour of carpet to go with yellow walls."

"Yellow? Rather high frequency. Why not something simpler. Cream is a calming colour."

"Oh come on, really? Yellow has all the advantages, and it'll make us both climb out of our comfort zone."

"Cream."

"*Yellow*," Will insisted.

"Cream is a calming neutral."

"You want a neutral? Then pick white. I'm not having cream, it's sickly. I want yellow. Like lily pollen."

"White is clinical. I am sure I have enough of white at work."

"Well then, yellow should give you a break."

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Acrimony/Compassion

Chapter Summary

> “It’s fine, really.”
> “It is? Then why did you bring it up?”
> “I didn’t, you di-” Alana Bloom stalled.
>
> She should have known better really, by now. She should have known better than to get into a discussion about sensitive information with Hannibal. Ever since she’d met him Alana had realised that she wasn’t as smart as she thought she was. No one could get her mentally tangled like he could.

Chapter Notes

> For Housenka and opalfruitsx, for requesting some Alana jealousy.

“Why do you keep asking?” Will asked her agitatedly, frowning as he tried to scroll through the report on his laptop, “Like it matters.”

“I just think it would be a lot easier if you were to get along,” she said diplomatically; when Will continued his search, mouth shut, she sighed, “you didn’t have any complaints when you met him.”

The room was empty but for them, bright with strip lights over desks and dark windows looking out over the winter landscape far below. Will had hastily plugged his laptop into the desk outlet when Alana had said something that had sparked his imagination, causing them to hole up in the quiet but somehow claustrophobic classroom, made so mainly by Will’s own unique brand of fervour. Somewhere, between booting up and Will becoming so manically tense that he couldn’t follow through on his train of thought, the conversation had wandered around to Hannibal Lecter; mainly because it was easy to make Will let her in when he was distracted.

“That’s because you wouldn’t let me complain,” Will clarified, head tipped towards her as she stood behind him, brows raised above his glasses.

“The pair of you talked for nearly an hour,” she said, rolling her eyes because she knew he couldn’t see the gesture, “when have you *ever* talked with a stranger like that? I thought you’d left, gone home. Nearly gave me whiplash finding you two on the balcony like a pair of old crows.”

“He’s conceited,” Will said quickly, “and arrogant. And narcissistic. And obsequious.”

“Not obsequious,” Alana singsonged, “that’s unfair and you know it.”

Will shrugged, licking at his lower lip before tapping loudly on the laptop casing. Alana would normally have flinched when Will closed it suddenly with a loud snap, but she was used to his mood swings by now. He sat back on his stool, hooking his foot under the desk for support, and folded his arms.

“Fine, he isn’t,” Will conceded, “I ran out of adjectives.”

“Personally, I think you two get along.”

“When have I ever *got along* with anyone?” Will asked brazenly, “He’s...amusing. I’ll give you that, alright? Doesn’t change anything.”

She watched him, small smile tickling her mouth. Then it faltered: *for a moment the room reminded her of the cramped little treatment room at the Baltimore Facility, with Chilton chattering over her shoulder as she watched Will on the monitor, his stare inverted back right down his own throat. An entire month subjected to the worst Will Graham had to offer, until she’d managed to force the blindfold from his face and have him see the world again, and not just the monsters lurking behind his eyes.*

You cleared him for field duty, she reminded herself harshly, *don’t start doubting your own workings. Nothing good down that rabbit hole.* Clearing her throat, she put her hands loosely on her hips and brought the smile back as best she could. Will was watching her like a hawk, even if his gaze flitted about between her nose and her neck.

“Gone awful quiet there,” he said soberly.

“Are you going to show me that report?”

“I don’t know where the hell it is, or what the hell I was going to even...forget it, ok?” Will sighed, “Just forget it.”

“It’ll come to you, don’t rush it,” Alana said, standing up from her lean against the desk; she watched him, face softening, “Honestly, you two are more alike than you know. I’d really like you to try and make this work, with Hannibal I mean. He’s a better man than you give him credit for. Anyway, you’re going to be working with him soon.”

“Fine, sure, whatever you want,” Will said tiredly, grabbing his glasses from his face and blinking tightly as if trying to get a bare scrape of moisture onto dry eyes; didn’t manage to stop his sarcasm leaking out like an oil spill, “I’ll take him out on the town and show him a grand old time, happy?”

“You’re cranky today,” she managed a genuine smile, picking up her bag.

When Will was a jerk at least you knew he wasn’t overanalysing everything and everyone, and he was more prone to flights of sincerity.

“And you’re smug today,” he bit back; Will shoved his glasses back on jerkily, motions taught as he chewed at the inside of his lip. He sighed, clicking his tongue, before looking past her towards the dark windows, swallowing, “sorry. I didn’t mean that.”

“I know,” she said, still smiling, “it’s perfectly normal for you to be worried, Will. Nothing wrong with that.”

He hadn’t argued with her further, which had made her hopeful for the future of their working relationship. And their friendship. And Will getting to know the man she respected most in her life.

Hannibal is going to have a field day, Alana thought, smile turning to a laugh as she waved goodbye to Will, receiving a dismissive flap of the hand in return. Her old mentor had been bothering her about another meet up with Will for weeks now, ever since the two of them had talked at her party. They’d clearly hit it off, and she would admit that at first she’d reacted like a possessive jackass. Having time to calm down had helped, and realising that not only could Lecter be good for Will, but she was sure the vice versa also applied. Will was bluntly down-to-earth and wasted no time telling people the truth, which she was sure would help capture some of Hannibal’s ethereal flights of fancy, like fireflies in a schoolboy’s net.

As she left the building she flicked out a text and tried not to feel the smugness Will had accused her of creep into the tone:

I’ve got you a present

“It’s fine, really.”

“It is? Then why did you bring it up?”

“I didn’t, you di-” Alana Bloom stalled.

She should have known better really, by now. She should have known better than to get into a discussion about sensitive information with Hannibal. Ever since she’d met him Alana had realised that she wasn’t as smart as she thought she was. No one could get her mentally tangled like he could.

Sometimes she liked to think her life had been leading her towards the future she deserved, and that her future was standing right next to her in this sterile elevator. *An only child, blissful memories of childhood, middle class upbringing, supportive parents, father encouraging her tomboy side, scraped knees, climbed trees, then school, realising her status belittled all that her mother and father had inspired in her, rebelling, getting into the shit with people that mattered, then catching the eyes of the people that mattered even more, scholarship, college, impressing and disdaining, feeling on top of the world in her cap and gown, between her parents who loved her and her professors who admired her.*

Hannibal Lecter just seemed like he should fit into it all somewhere. She'd like to say she caught his eye first, but it would be a lie. She'd learned about him from her peers at St James; they all liked to call him *ring material*, but he was apparently a stalwart bachelor. She'd thought it all very trite and stupid, until she'd laid eyes on him. Tall, elegant, sophisticated, powerful, considerate, a sense of etiquette so rigid that it was almost chivalrous, and a sense of humour so dry that it was almost childish. And beautiful, she could admit that, he was beautiful. Savagely so.

And she'd been introduced, *made sure she was introduced*, at a function, and she could tell he'd been impressed with her intelligence and wit, and there was potential there, between them, potential to find someone who was an equal rather than always having to look up to see them clearly, and he'd mentored her through her medical modules, and they'd grown close *but never quite close enough but always just close enough*, enough that she believed she understood what it was to move up and away and fly free of being a female omega in a male alpha's world. And she did, she did know and she thought she might love him, just enough...only Hannibal bloody Lecter liked to play her like a fiddle sometimes.

And not it the way she'd rather he did.

The elevator dinged loudly, making her feel oddly paranoid that others were going to hear their words. It was noticeably cooler in the basement. Part of her knew that there were simple physical reasons for the change: *unventilated condensation, the deep Spring earth holding the chill, the fact that the basement was a far older part of the building's construction than the swish offices upstairs. Y*et the irrational part of her brain always brought it back to the morgue. The chill of death lounged around the tiled halls. She hated coming down here.

"Hannibal, I can't talk about this with you. You know that."

"I know," he said as they walked out of the elevator, "but you only did it out of concern. You are no gossip, Alana. You are worried about him. As am I."

"I'm his psychiatrist, I'm always worried about him. But Will knows what he's doing," she shrugged, trying not to be pulled in by Hannibal's easy flattery.

"And yet what he's doing is cumulative," as they turned the corner the sign for the morgue and the labs came into sight; two men dressed in white and carrying large boxes walked past them, not even glancing in their direction, "there will always need to be a way to skim off the overflow or you risk a drowning. As far as I see it, he barely has his head above water at the best of times."

"He was close once," she shrugged, feeling sure that she wasn't giving away enough detail for it to be a breach of confidentiality, "but he pulled himself back. He always does."

"And when he doesn't?" the question was passively accusatory.

There was no answer to that, and Alana knew it. She just wished that Hannibal would accept it too. *Who is he to talk, anyway?* she asked herself, trying her best to feel affronted, *he barely knows Will. You know him better than most, you know how best to handle his neuroses.* Will Graham was a good friend, and constant harassment about his mental state was

something she knew would only make things worse. Will required room to breathe when he needed it, without someone else breathing down his neck about whether or not he was breathing enough.

Taking a breath for herself brought her a little comfort, enough to believe she was still in control. *This was her arena, and she wasn't going to be overruled.*

The long corridor was harshly lit with strip-lights, making the walls seem to buzz. At the end it turned a sharp right and through a pair of double doors. Hannibal had stayed suspiciously silent as they walked; it niggled at her. *He thinks he won that argument, doesn't he,* she thought indignantly. Ahead of them she could see the entry to the morgue, the back of what could be Beverly Katz, the sound of what could be Zeller and Price arguing about something. *Normality, at least as much as she could ask for.*

Only when she realised Hannibal's footsteps were no longer beside hers did she stop and turn, finding him looking to his left towards the small office room where Jack usually projected slides of autopsies and lab work for his team. At the back, in the dark, on three chairs which had been pushed together awkwardly lay Will Graham, fast asleep with his jacket wadded up and stuffed under his head for a pillow. It might have been the least comfortable looking thing she'd ever seen, enough that she could feel herself shaking her head despite wishing she could be more lenient.

After defending you for the last half an hour Graham, she thought. Who slept outside a morgue anyway? The air around them was still and rank with the smell of chemicals and barely disguised rotting corpse. She wished Will didn't make her maternal instinct flare at every chance it got.

"Ah, Dr. Bloom," Jack Crawford appeared at the doorway, pulling her attention, "sorry to bring you here at such short notice."

"That's alright," she said with a quick smile, "you're lucky I'm a sucker for disassociated personality disorder, or you couldn't have lured me down here with a bourbon on the rocks."

Jack grinned, seeming happy to play into the pretence, "Is Dr. Lecter with you?"

"He's-" Alana looked to her left, blanking when she found nothing but air; then Hannibal appeared through the door to the office, no longer wearing his overcoat.

"Jack," Hannibal smiled, reaching out to shake hands, "we need to stop meeting like this."

Only later, as they stood around the steel ringed room discussing motivation and angular lacerations and listening to Price and Zeller badger each other back and forth, did Will appear. He entered, taking a single step to the right and leaning heavily back against the wall, hands clasping his elbows loosely. He stayed there, unobtrusive, staring at the corpse on the slab, swallowing slowly. He looked drained, as if sleep had only made things worse. Over his left arm hung Hannibal' s overcoat.

The room continued to let Will exist over an undrawn line, separate until he wished to include himself. The only one who continued to not follow the unsaid rule was Hannibal. She

couldn't help but watch, even as she nodded to Katz about the likelihood of the killer maybe shaving his head or wearing some sort of suit that restricted contact with the victim; *no hair, no fibre, no fingerprint.*

All she could see was Hannibal standing next to Will, as if to see the room from his perspective: *outside looking in*. Something was said as Hannibal leaned down to his right, something that made Will's stoic, tired face glimmer with the hope of humour. His mouth ticked to a barely-there smile, making Will scratch his jaw to hide it. It was easy to read the reply.

Thank you, Will said as he handed back the coat. Hannibal took it without ceremony.

You're welcome, came the reply.

"How long have I known you now?"

Will didn't meet her eye, but he did stall his movements. The lecture hall was still emptying, some students trying to gain Graham's attention and failing. Will kept his eyes on his things, tidying papers away neatly, laptop clicked closed, projector switched to a black screen.

"Two and a half years?" Will said vaguely, "Give or take. Why'd you ask?"

"Why do you keep pretending we aren't friends?"

It was always trouble when Will grinned; *never quite reached his eyes.* She was beginning to wonder why he even bothered with the charade.

Things had been difficult, very difficult recently. Will wasn't only crawling back inside of himself, he was crawling back inside of himself to find the silhouette of the man that lurked there. *The Chesapeake Ripper, always skulking in their backdrop like a pantomime villain. A big bad wolf with surgical claws.* It was the reason she'd never wanted to become professionally involved with him, because this was the inevitable end; Will would know when the friendship became a ruse. Cursing Jack Crawford was easier, in the end, considering this was all his fault.

"We're friendly," Will shrugged, eyes on her shoulder as he pulled his bag strap over his head.

"Semantics, Will, are you going to get into semantics with me?"

"I'm not...not the best company right now," Will said, rictus smile still in place.

"So, no dinner huh?"

"I wouldn't want you to lose your appetite."

“Takes more than shop talk to put me off my...Will?”

Only Will was staring past her, frown firmly creasing his forehead. She turned, and couldn’t help mirroring his actions. *Against the backdrop* he stood between them and the doorway, leaving an elegant silhouette draped in maroon plaid.

“Hannibal,” she said, trying to leave an opening for explanation.

Unfortunately Will wasn’t patient enough for that, “What the hell are you doing here?” he asked bluntly.

“I was invited,” Hannibal was, luckily, never one for taking offence at Will’s directness, “Jack Crawford asked that I attend. Bring me up to speed.”

“Up to speed with the Ripper case,” Will asked tightly, “or with me?”

“I didn’t know I had to choose,” Hannibal said, face placid and open, eyes sliding over to her, “Alana, how did you find it?”

“Oh, I wasn’t here for the lecture,” she admitted.

“You missed a treat,” Hannibal said, “They applauded.”

“It was inappropriate,” Will said, weaving round Alana and then around Lecter, “but then you’d know all about that.”

“I like to think so,” Hannibal simply turned, watching Will as he made for the doors, “we have it in common.”

The room seemed suddenly close, like radiant heat. Smothering. She hated it, watching this. It was like watching a pair of strangers, when she should be seeing familiar faces. It wasn’t entirely fair, but she thought that maybe Hannibal brought out the worst in Will, *even though deep down she knew that Hannibal had a way of smoothing the thorns and trimming the stalks until he was left with nothing but the truth from Graham, something she had worked years to cultivate instead of mere months with Lecter*. Maybe that was why Will had come to hate Hannibal as much as he had. She wished it hadn’t turned out this way. She’d wanted friends and ended up with rivals.

“You trying to goad me, Dr. Lecter?” Will asked airily, turning, walking backwards a few steps, stopping with his hand on the door.

“Hannibal, please Will. I thought we agreed on first names or nothing.”

“Our agreement only counts when you’re not violating the rest of it,” Will said, holding the door open, “including trying to get inside my head. Anyway, Alana and I are headed to dinner, so...”

There was her opportunity. *Set everything back to normal, take control, split up whatever she was worried might happen here.* If only it wouldn’t be giving Will all the excuses he needed

to stay away from anything sociable. Despite her misgivings, it would be criminal to pass up an opportunity to make him face this united front head on.

“Don’t look at me,” she lifted her hands, palms up, “I thought you weren’t good company today.”

“I’m not,” Will nodded, “I’m really not. But considering how long you’ve known me, thought you’d also know how fickle I am.”

“Then perhaps I should offer myself as an intermediary,” Hannibal said, “I have a pork loin resting in the fridge. Alana can vouch for my cooking.”

“I can,” she said, head lilting to the left, smiling, “less intimidating, perhaps? I wasn’t trying to get you to spill your guts, I just wanted to give you a night off.”

“You don’t want to know what I do with my nights off,” Will said darkly, staring at the wall, “but thanks, for the offer.”

With that, he left. Alana sighed, resting back on one heel where she left herself sway. *Like she had when she was a little girl.* When Hannibal looked to her she was all ready with a quip about Will’s stubborn need to keep everyone at arms length. Instead she was once more beat to the punch.

“One moment,” Hannibal said, conspiratorial, before hurrying after Will.

She was left to watch the double door flap shut, mouth still open to speak. Just as with a few weeks prior, watching them both in the morgue, standing together in silent camaraderie, she had no idea what Hannibal said to Will to get him to comply with interventions that Will would never have accepted in all the time she’d known him.

Even later on, at dinner in an agreed neutral restaurant instead of the far-too-personal arena of Lecter’s own home, she felt like she was the one *outside looking in.*

There was no need to knock, considering the door was open, but it felt polite nonetheless. A bag of dried apricots in one hand and a strained smile on her face, she looked at the sight before her and tried not to feel responsible.

“I’m not dying, right?” Will, propped up in the hospital bed which was half littered with reports and paperwork, looked like he might have been at one point before being dragged back into the world of the living. His skin was pale and clammy, broad dark circles beneath his eyes, half hidden by his glasses, “You’re looking at me like I might be dying.”

“Shouldn’t I be?” she tried to make light of it, but it was hard not to let the truth glance into her tone.

The seat by the bed held the box that was surely responsible for the unwelcome paperwork. *She'd remember to scold Crawford for allowing Will to indulge himself when he should be resting.* She lifted it and placed it on the floor by her feet before sitting. The apricots were slipped onto his bedside table. Will smiled cautiously, looking a little bemused.

"No grapes?" he joked half-heartedly.

"I drove past the market on the way here. Apricots are high in iron. Eat them, they'll make you feel better."

"I got a blood transfusion, you know," Will raised a brow, but didn't have the confidence to look utterly facetious, "or two. Not sure."

Alana felt her lips thin to a tight line. She rubbed her hands together, feeling the chill there. The room felt small, as if enclosing them in some odd alternate space. *Perhaps in another life they could have been normal and happy and she allowed the futile, stupid moment to pass in which she wished they both lived there*. Instead, she was forced to watch him be broken, again and again.

"Am I just supposed to, what?" she asked as Will frowned, "Live with this? I'm the one who okayed you for the field, Will. Why do you insist on making me regret it?"

He looked away when she stared at him, trying her best to get through that shell. His right hand groped about on the bedspread, finding a clicker which he pushed before taking a deep breath. She looked up, noting the large morphine pump humming to itself against the wall. Will managed to look marginally less stressed when he addressed her this time. *She wanted to ask how much it hurt, but refused to be that much of a sadist about it all.*

"He was just a kid, Alana."

"You let your guard down, and you got hurt," she cut to the chase.

"He was just a *kid*," Will shook his head, sitting back against the meagre pillows, "what did you expect me to do?"

"Follow orders? Not get too close?" she said, "And that's just for starters. Why do you always get too close, Will..?"

A knock at the door interrupted her, making her snap her words back into her mouth. There, in the doorway, stood the man who she had to thank for Will being alive at all. Even though she wanted to, truthfully she felt like asking him to give them time alone, just this once.

Instead, she said, "Hannibal, hello."

"Alana, wonderful to see you," he said in reply, gentlemanly as always; he looked tired, but nowhere in the ballpark of Will Graham's wraith-like visage, "Will, last we spoke I clearly remember asking you to get some rest."

"I spent the better half of yesterday unconscious, I don't need any rest," Will said tightly, gathering as much of the paperwork spread across his knees as he could, tapping it into an

awkward pile.

“Hannibal’s right,” Alana said, even though she felt itchy saying so, “it’s best you let the others deal with the fallout from this, ok? Recuperate, properly, or you’ll end up in that bed permanently.”

“Great advice, coming from the woman who walked into my sickroom and started interrogating me,” Will said firmly.

“That’s entirely unfair,” Alana retorted.

“Can we please...” she could hear Hannibal say as she and Will continued to bicker, “please, let me...that is *enough*.”

On falling silent, she felt small. Like a girl chastised by her teacher for talking in class. It was demeaning, only made worse by the fact that she couldn’t blame Hannibal for making her feel it. *You’re losing control of this whole thing,* she thought to herself.

“I am sorry Alana, to be so rude, but I must ask you to leave,” Hannibal said as he picked up the box by her feet, offering it to Will, “and I must ask that you put those away Will. Or I shall have them shredded.”

“It would almost be worth it,” Will said, sounding half irritated, half amused, “to see Jack’s face.”

“Wouldn’t it, though?” Hannibal joined in on the joke as Will stuffed the case notes back into the box, “I shall be having words with him about how he treats my patients.”

“You will, huh?” Will said, sighing as if this were all just the inevitable at this point, “I’d warn you off it, but then when have you ever listened to me?”

“I always listen to you Will,” Hannibal said seriously; Alana saw Will duck his head, but it wasn’t enough to hide the small smile on his lips. Hannibal turned to her, “I shall walk you to the door, if you are agreeable,” before giving Will a look, “rest, please, Mr Graham. Or it will be small comfort when I prescribe a sedative.”

“Well that isn’t small comfort,” Will was muttering even as he dutifully lay back in the bed, pulling the thin blanket up over his chest, “that’s *no* comfort.”

The hospital was busy, but Hannibal walked through the corridors with her as if he were in the halls of his own house; confident and utterly self assured. She gravitated towards that, hoping to pick up a little for herself.

“You two have quite the repertoire going,” she said dryly.

“I am trying my best to keep his spirits up,” Hannibal said, conspiratorial, “Will doesn’t seem to like making things easy for anyone in that department.”

“You’re not wrong,” she said, hesitating only a moment before adding, “you did a good job with him.”

“Am I to presume you are not only referring to my immaculate stitch work?” Hannibal joked.

“There aren’t many people Will can rely on. I just wanted to thank you for making yourself one of those people.”

“He is my very dear friend,” Hannibal said as if it were simply a given, “If I were him, I would expect no less.”

The words should have been comforting, and yet Alana knew that recently she found their relationship to be less comforting and more taunting. As these were her own demons, she didn’t try and open a discussion. Instead she smiled and nodded and agreed not to be a stranger at his next dinner party.

“Graham,” he answered the phone succinctly.

It would have been fine, if they hadn’t been mid conversation. Alana snapped her mouth shut and sighed, looking out the window to her right. Should have known better to dive into contentious topics in a confined space, *Will had smelled her desperation.* Now she was forced to accept Will’s utter disregard for her while they drove back to Quantico in their cavalcade of SUVs.

“Yeah, I got it,” Will said to whoever was on the other end of the line, “no, I got it, alright? I’m fine, I am. Don’t...” Alana watched Will in her peripheral, change from terse, het-up and agitated, to a smile with a frown, devolving into a stilted laugh, “nice try. That’s some lazy psychiatry Doctor Lecter.”

Alana chanced a look, leaning her head against her hand, elbow against the door. *It was becoming a bit of a habit* , she thought angrily as she watched Will, practically curled away into the other side of the car, *that Hannibal Lecter was managing to insert himself right into her world at all the worst moments.* Will was close to an edge she wasn’t sure anyone could see but him, and Alana wished he would talk to her. Talk to her like a friend, not a colleague. Like a friend, not a psychiatrist.

She didn’t want into his head, she just wanted to know that the inside of his head wasn’t eating him alive.

“Hannibal, I know. Sorry. Is it that unusual?” Will was saying, “You’re making it very difficult to know. No, I...really? You really want to do this now? Uh, ok, well...” he stopped, flicking his gaze over to Alana, noting her watching him, before looking back to the window, “Not exactly the same. Something must have gone wrong. It wasn’t a straight B&E, they came in through the front door. Windows?” Will stopped, reaching awkwardly for a manilla folder he’d stashed with the other files in the pocket of the back of the seat in front of him, rifling through one handed, “there was...there was nothing. No. Friends? Of the kids? I thought the same thing.”

Letting out a sigh and checking her phone were the most pleasant ways she could think to vent her frustration. Right now, she felt that both men deserved each other. It was petty and trite, but Alana wasn't feeling particularly charitable right now. There were locked boxes with thrown away keys, and then there was Will Graham. Right now she just wished he would meet her half way, but instead he was more than willing to be rude and dismissive; her least favourite of his traits.

"Deserving? Don't know if I'd use the word," Will said wryly, "Why do you keep asking me that? I am, I'm fine. No, I thought better of it. Uh huh, right. Aren't you?" Will looked suddenly serious, worn down, "Can't break what's already broken. Well I am now," voice terse, a break and then, "I'm angry because you brought it up," a long gap, in which Will slowly transformed, face softening, eyes down to his knees; he rubbed at his jaw, then shook his head even though only Alana could see it, "alright. *Alright,* I give up. You win. Preference? No. You choose. Okay, I have to...yeah. Goodbye."

The phone was stuffed unceremoniously back into his pocket, while Will continued to keep his gaze as far away from her as possible; out of the window. In that moment she thought him childish, and wished that she didn't believe Hannibal Lecter was better for Will's psyche than she was. In the end it was all arbitrary, but that didn't make it any easier to deal with.

"Preference?" she asked as they were being signed in at the gate.

There was a telling pause, in which Will chewed at the inside of his lip, and then..."Dinner. Between him always asking and Beverly goading me to say yes, I guess I'd had enough."

"So you just give in to taunts now," she said, unimpressed, "should I buy a ticket to this train? Maybe it'll get me more results than just being friendly."

"Christ," Will grimaced, taking a deep breath, "I'm..." he looked at her, frowning, face strained but sad, "I don't need this right now. Not from *any*one Alana. So many people, all caught up in this," he gestured, fidgety, "I feel like...I don't know."

"Feel like what?" she asked, her curiosity playing second to the insult she felt like a slap; when Will simply stared at the seat in front, mute, she sat back with her arms folded, confidence stung, "you know for a self-professed rebel of the class system, you sure are ready to offer your soul up to the nearest alpha with a wallet, aren't you."

Will's reaction would have been hilarious, if it weren't so genuine. He looked at her as if she'd just laughed in his face and told him their entire relationship had been a ruse. *That she was just like everyone else.*

"*You know?*" he parroted as they pulled up in the shadow of Quantico, the gloom casting Will sharply against the radiant light, "Jealousy doesn't fucking suit you, Alana."

He'd left her feeling like the shit on his shoe. All day she'd tried to call on him but found his office empty, and no one to direct her. Wouldn't answer his phone, email, text. She didn't feel like she was giving up when she stopped looking, instead believing that she knew Will well enough to tell when he needed to be alone. Work out his own demons. *Forgive her in his own time.*

Still, his words stung close to home. Alana Bloom did what she did best, in these sorts of situations with Graham. She ignored it.

“Fifth victim, seen here, was found...”

Zoning out should have been an offence, and yet Alana had heard it all before. And again before that. This meeting, called hastily, as was obvious from the fact that it was in the briefing room for local PD rather than their own department’s which was in use right now, was draining her nerves. Next to her, Hannibal sat placidly observing the crowd with keen eyes. She wished he wouldn’t be so damn alert, it was making her feel worse.

She felt justified in blaming the back of a well trimmed blond head, sitting two chairs in front of her, to her left. *Charles Hatcher, new addition to the Ripper case, twenty three year old alpha, definite blue flame material.* She wished their tight unit of staff had been left pristine, but Purnell and the high ups were clearly itching to get this Ripper case put to bed before it tarnished the entire department’s reputation.

So now they were stuck, listening to Jack recount everything he could of their months of work within the space of half an hour, and she had to listen to it. It didn’t help that Will had stumbled into the room late, flustered, eyes scanning the room without meeting anyone’s gaze, before being forced to stand next to the whiteboard on the left of Jack’s impromptu teaching platform; *no more chairs*. He looked like a scarecrow, arms reaching behind him to grip the table there tightly, watching Jack’s every move as if trying to pretend he wasn’t standing up in front of a room full of people.

“If I could just stop you there,” Hatcher piped up in his thick New England accent, “I’m a little confused.”

“About?” Jack asked, clearly not impressed at being interrupted.

“You have here that Elsie Nichols was attributed to the Chesapeake Ripper?” he asked, sounding confused.

“Right,” Jack said.

“Not the Minnesota Shrike.”

“Correct,” Jack said, obviously trying to move on, “the display was...”

“Vulgar,” Will didn’t seem to be able to help himself from interjecting, voice taught and low, “it was a slaughter.”

She could almost feel Hatcher’s focus switch entirely to Will, *exactly what she hadn’t wanted to happen so soon.* He was surely the one Hatcher had been told about, the one that got the gossip train running through the building, the one whose insight was almost too convenient. I

didn’t help that Will looked like he wanted nothing more than to slink back out the door he’d come through and dissapear.

“And you must be Will Graham,” Hatcher said, nodding in Will’s direction; when he got no reply he cleared his throat, smiling as if he’d had a point proven, “I’ll admit, I don’t see it.”

“...Hobbs loved the women he killed,” Will said after the silence became too damning, “and the Ripper guts them like pigs. Elsie Nichols was a pig on display in the butcher's window, not the love letter of the Shrike."

"As far as I can tell from the profile of the CR," Hatcher said, flipping through the folder of paper in his lap, "it's not like he ever showed a proclivity for working with others."

"They didn't do it together," Will said tightly, "he did it to...to honour the Shrike, but also to show how utterly amateur he was by comparison. He was claiming *dominance* over the display."

"Wait, I'm confused," Hatcher said, frowning and sounding too smug to be sincere, "This is...I apologise if this sounds too forward, but this is all a bit convenient, isn't it? I never heard of a serial killer who could appreciate another serial killer while simultaneously wishing to usurp their throne."

"Then maybe you don't belong here," Will said without thinking; there was a pronounced silence, where Will stared at a random chair leg and said nothing. Eventually he sniffed and looked to the floor by his feet, continuing as if nothing had happened, "She was missing her lungs and only her lungs. The Ripper takes trophies, organs. The Shrike used every part of the girls he killed. It fits.”

“But she didn’t have anything obviously missing when you made your prediction of the CR's involvement,” Hatcher shook his head, looking directly at Will who looked away, fingers taught around the desk, “and from the report it seems like you knew to look for the organ that had been removed and then replaced before anyone even came up with this theory. How’d you do that exactly?”

“Exactly?” Will said the word as if it were both hilarious and terrifying, before Jack cut in.

“I’m sure your brief included Will’s exceptional talents,” Jack cut in, only Hatcher seemed more than happy to press the issue.

“Well yeah, but seeing is believing, right?” Hatcher said, grinning.

Beside her Hannibal stood up and made his way to the water cooler, pouring himself a small paper cup’s worth. In truth she’d expected him to talk, diffuse the situation as he was wont to do when things got heated. Instead, she had to watch as she was subjected to a territorial display so flagrant she was amazed Will allowed it. Or Jack for that matter.

Without saying a word Hannibal took the water to Will, who accepted it with a fitful nod and a murmured *thanks*, and then simply inserted himself next to Will, leaning against the table

directly between Will and Hatcher. The room was quiet as Will downed the water in one, crushing the cup and letting it fall.

“You were saying, agent Crawford,” was all Hannibal said, handing the platform back to Jack.

And things moved forwards, because there was no other way for them to move without devolving into a shouting match. Or a fight. Instead things shifted back on track, at least with the presentation. The room itself continued to shuffle and buzz with the intrigue of it. *He’s just being protective,* she told herself as she tried her best not to stare at the pair of them, Will seeming infinitely small as he huddled behind the protective wall that had been erected before him. Without that explanation, Alana felt a little ill at the implications.

“...here you’ll note the clippings, with silhouettes. When examining bite marks it is important to...”

Clicking for the next slide was punctuated by the sound of the doors opening and clacking shut. She continued, until Jack Crawford walked into view. There was a part of her that wanted to simply keep this all going without acknowledging his presence, but Jack wasn’t to be ignored. She lifted her hand to the class.

“Excuse me for a moment,” she said before approaching Jack, face set.

“Where’s Graham?” Jack asked innocently.

Alana folded her arms and drew in a breath through her nose, leading him further down the entryway until they stood at the doors “He didn’t come in this morning.”

“Okay,” Jack looked like he was on the back foot already, “didn’t call in sick? Anything?”

“Would I be teaching his class if he had?” she asked, “You told me you wouldn’t let him get too close, Jack.”

It said a lot about Crawford’s respect for her that he didn’t try and dispute the fact. Instead he turned, without another word, and walked outside, pulling out his phone. A moment passed in which she considered not following him. *Will was her patient, but he was her friend first, and she’d be damned if Jack hid any more of Will’s problems from her without a fight.* She marched out into the hallway, catching Crawford’s eye as he stood, phone to ear with one hand, hand to hip with the other. The man sighed, lips curled in until the phone was answered.

“...Hannibal?” he said, frowning, “have I called the wrong number? I’m looking for Will Graham.”

Alana watched him cautiously, brows drawn together. When Jack closed his eyes and roughly rubbed at the flesh above his left eyebrow, Alana knew something was wrong. She approached him demandingly.

“Will, goddamit, is this a joke?” Jack was saying; she thought, for a moment, that she might have been able to hear Will’s voice from the other end, but then it faded, “well to me it’s exactly what it sounds like.”

Jack was pissed, that much was clear. *Is he hurt, is he in trouble?* She wanted to ask, wanted to grab the phone from Jack and demand Will tell her he was going to be alright. Because he had been, had been telling her everything was fine for years now, but she’d never given him the benefit of the doubt. Had always known that the smiles were fake, little masks sewn onto the patchwork that made up Will’s facade.

“Jack,” she said, unable to wait any longer; she bristled as he held up a hand, demanding silence.

“I’m well aware of the time, don’t change the subject,” Jack said arrogantly, voice powerful with dislike, “how long has this been going on? I have every right to know, don’t play me Graham. Will! Will?” he looked down at the phone, call finished, before cracking, “Shit!”

“Jesus, Jack,” Alana said, face the picture of worry, “what’s wrong? Is he ok?”

“Is he ok,” Jack repeated the words as if they might be a sick joke, “Oh, he’s fine. Just fine. Tell me, Doctor Bloom, exactly how long have Graham and Lecter been involved?”

“Involved...” she shook her head, confused, “that’s your department, Jack, you brought Hannibal in on this case.”

“Huh,” Jack narrowed his eyes, watching her closely for a few seconds, before looking away, “you don’t know then. Finish your class, Doctor Bloom,” he said dismissively, before turning and walking away down the corridor, smart-footed.

“Jack, what the hell is going on?” Alana called after him.

No reply. Which was the same shtick she got from Will when she tried to call him after the lecture ended. She stood, chewing her fingernails as she leaned against the lectern desk, before taking a deep breath. *Will’s ok, he’s fine, no need to panic.* Licking her lips, she thought back to Jack’ s exchange on the phone . *Hannibal*, flared up in neon lights.

Click, click, click, the pieces fit together like hands, fingers sliding between each other, holding tight.

Left alone, she stood there worrying herself sick over something that had been swept out of her hands. She felt foolish and humiliated. Alana shook her head, sniffing back the ridiculous tide of emotion that she could feel swelling. Her realisation had come too quick but too late. *Idiot, such an idiot* , she thought, *when did you let yourself become the welcome mat, huh?*

Her thoughts had become so focused, terrified of some dire outcome, that they had wiped clean the worries that she would have had otherwise. *Losing sight of what she wanted, what she needed*. She felt selfish and, for once, allowed it to exist without regret.

When he eventually showed up, half an hour later, Will walked around her at a decent distance before entering his office. That he didn't shut the door in her face let Alana know she was at least welcome; for courtesy's sake she closed it behind her.

Will sat at his desk, elbows against the pristine surface, heels of his hands against his eyes and fingers reaching up to clamp down on wayward curls.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, unable to be curt.

"I guess I'm looking for you," she said, because there was nothing else to say.

"That's a good guess," Will said, lifting his head and placing his hands flat on the desk top.

From the smell of him, and the look of him, and the marks just visible on the skin at his neck, it just reinforced her theory. They sat at opposite ends of the chess board, so many other pieces littering the view. Alana suddenly felt as if she'd never even had a chance to see Will without obstruction, not since they'd started working together. There had always been someone interfering, blocking her chance. Now, Will was the one taking that chance away from her.

"You look like I feel," she said, trying to make light of this miserable situation; her tone couldn't quite come out as convincing.

"You know, I don't really feel that bad," Will said.

As she sat down across from him, she wasn't sure if he was trying to be hurtful or not. Or whether he even knew he needed to apologise. *Don't give him any more outs,* she warned herself, *Will knows you better than you know you. He knew what this meant.* Although it was true, she hadn't seen him looking this well in years; there was a healthy glow to his skin that seemed to have washed away his sunken, pale look.

"You've stopped taking them, haven't you," she said.

Will didn't ask her what she was referring to. Instead he tried to smile, devolving into a flickering twitch. The suppressants allowed Will to function, and she'd never seen him without them. Now, being able to peer this close to who he actually was, it stank of resentment. On both fronts she'd been cast aside, *from Hannibal's affections and from Will's trust.*

"That obvious, huh?"

"You're not wearing your cologne," she shrugged, feeling deflated, only able to point out facts, "and yet you don't reek of a chip fryer."

Will nodded, lips sucked in over his teeth; he looked like a trapped animal, eyes darting around for escape from the situation he'd created for himself. Instead he jumped straight at

the problem, and she wished they'd been able to ignore it for just a little longer.

"Does this mean..?" he swallowed, shaking his head, "No. I guess we were never really friends, right?"

"I'm your friend Will," she said tiredly.

"You won't be, after this. You can't. I know you can't."

"Trying to shift the blame?"

Will looked down at the desk, fingers tapping lightly. He shrugged.

"Sometimes I get the feeling we're just two bits of debris, caught in his tide. He makes me question everything, and yet always leads me right to the answer. I...I've never known who I am more than when I'm with him," he said genuinely, looking up to catch her eye; *look straight into her eyes.*

"Do you love him?" she asked.

"I know that *you* do," Will said, making Alana's mouth thin to a stark line.

"For fuck's sake," she laughed hollowly, shaking her head as she lounged back in her chair, "is that what this is going to be now? Are you going to use me as an excuse? That's petty Graham, really petty."

"I...I don't know what I want to do," Will said genuinely, making her stare at him, "he thinks the whole thing is *funny*. Is it? I don't know right now, I don't know if it is or not."

"You had sex with him, why the hell would that be funny?" Alana snorted out a laugh because she had no idea how to react.

"I don't know," Will said, seeming to absorb her emotions like a sponge, laughing just as nervously.

They sat there, together and yet apart; deflated. Will took a deep breath, letting it out before tipping his head to the right. His face was tense, almost frowning.

"I feel like," she puffed out a mouthful of air and shook her head, "like an engineer who didn't even know what they were building," Alana said, swivelling her chair marginally back and forth, "I did this to myself. Who knew I hated myself this much?"

"It's always easier to take things back than to go forwards," he said, "I'm a coward when it comes to people."

"Only you're not a coward," Alana said, running her tongue through her clenched teeth as she watched him move uncomfortably, "not when it comes to the truth."

"I don't know what the truth is here, I don't *know* what anyone wants."

“What do *you* want?” she asked.

Silence. Will stared at something she couldn’t see. He rolled his neck and brought his shoulders back towards each other until something cracked.

“I’m not your patient,” Will said.

“Yeah, I’m starting to see that you never were,” she said, unable to hide the bile.

“Would it help if I said that I was sorry?”

“Yes.”

“Then I’m sorry.”

“It didn’t help.”

There were robins in the garden, two of them. They stared at her as she got out of her car, tweeting an alarm as they hopped about on top of the winter jasmine. It took all she had not to lift her hands and clap loudly, scare them off. *They made her feel like an intruder in a place she wanted to feel safe.*

Hannibal had left the door unlocked, allowing her to enter without asking. It was absolving, to an extent, and welcoming to another. He was arranging parcels of greeseproof paper in the kitchen when she entered. The room seemed dark, but it was only due to the winter sky, bruised and blue clouds rolling by outside.

“Hi,” she said, at a loss for something more appropriate.

“Good evening,” he said as he snipped a length of butcher’s twine, smiling at some joke yet to come, “do you have an appointment.”

She shook her head, but the smile still came unbidden, “Do you have a beer?”

Time seemed to move back to where she expected it to have been. *Back to a time when her worlds had been separate and concise, and no tricky troubles muddling them altogether.* She took the beer, noting Hannibal had joined her in holding his own. They clinked glasses and sat together in the kitchen. It felt as if she should be here to have her own speech, something cutting, something dismissive.

Only she knew it could never be that way between them. She couldn’t allow it to be.

“Nothing’s changed then?” she asked.

“If you say so,” Hannibal said, seeming to watch her with pleasure as she took a large swallow, “does it agree with you?”

“Fishing for compliments? I never thought I’d see the day.”

“Everyone has an ego worth stroking.”

The flush came without her want, and only served to highlight her missed opportunity. *What the hell was I thinking?* She asked herself for the hundredth time, *How’d you let him be the one that got away?* His cheeks were tinged with blood under the skin and his eyes shone. He was so very handsome in that moment, somehow flushed with secret victory. Claiming the wild Will Graham must have certainly *stroked his ego*. She just wished she could be happy for them, even if the whole debacle seemed hollow to her.

“He hasn’t moved in yet?” she asked, desperate to come up with a conversation topic.

“Will isn’t one to go by tradition,” Hannibal said.

“That he is not.”

“We both value a lack of consistency,” Hannibal explained, “the last thing I wish to remove is his independence.”

“Maybe better explain that clearly rather than leaving it to chance,” Alana said with a nod, lips pressed until they puffed the flesh around them; she let him take her coat from the back of her chair, hanging it on the rack behind the kitchen door, “he’s not one to always think the best of others or their intentions.”

Returning to his seat at the kitchen island, Hannibal pressed a couple of buttons on a control panel against the wall. The lights raised, swamping them in a gentle glow. It made it easier to see her, and for her to see him. His keen eyes observed and she hated all that they surely saw.

“Will likes to blame himself for other people’s problems,” she said, as close to admitting it as she’d allow herself to get.

“Sometimes valid, sometimes invalid,” Hannibal agreed, “more often than not invalid. Do you?”

“Blame him? No,” she lied.

“Then I suppose there is a chance we might all be civil, on our own terms,” he said, watching her.

“I think Will needs that. Really, Hannibal, I hope you know what you’re doing. I do. He’s,” she let out a sigh, “good at putting up a front. He deals with fear, a massive amount of fear every day. Don’t add to that, ok? That’s all I can tell you.”

Inclining his head, Hannibal acknowledged her words, or at least she hoped he did. *Always the purposeful enigma*.

“I defer to the passion of my esteemed colleague,” he said graciously.

“Have soapbox, will travel,” she joked, before lifting her glass and offering, “this *is* really good beer.”

“Playing to my ego? I never pegged you for a sycophant.”

“Only for personally tested products.”

“Then you should stay for dinner,” he offered, “you could rate the rack of lamb.”

“Who cooks rack of lamb for one?” she jested.

“I never intended to,” Hannibal said simply.

A tipping point, with her atop it on a solid platform of resentment. Either way she swayed, the slippery slope would be inevitable. Watching the foaming head on her bear tickle and crackle down, leaving an intricate pattern over the glass, Alana refused to slide down either of the nasty sides.

“Will's coming over?” she posited.

“He should be here soon,” Hannibal said easily as he stood, continuing to put away the meat he had partially wrapped, bringing out the lamb from the fridge, marinating in rosemary and garlic.

“Well, that’ll be nice,” she said, drinking for courage, “I haven’t seen him in a while.”

Even as she heard the front door open and realised that the door had not been left unlocked for her, she wondered how long she could balance on the point between acceptance and acrimony.

Even though she was definitely drunker than usual, and things were more opulent than she was used to (*a beautiful string quartet played for guests to dance, the catering had literally been overseen and prepared by Chef Lynch and her crew from Menton restaurant, there were ice sculptures which were being kept cool by fans in the heat, she was recognising senators among the guests*) it was still as boring as any other wedding she'd been to. Forced cheer, lots of waiting around, and watching long drawn out proceedings followed by greeting dozens of unknown faces and eating food you wouldn't have normally ordered had you been given a choice.

It was all just a bit nicer because Hannibal had impecable taste that he refused to compromise. She had even been to a pricey little boutique on Charles Street where she spent more than she'd meant to trying to buy a dress that would fit in with the wealthy; then the shoes that went with it. Looking around her she really, really dreaded to think how much this had all cost.

It was easy to sit with people she knew on a professional basis because it allowed her to keep the facade up, the friendly, demure smile. She was currently trying to mimic Beverly Katz's genuine joy, only it was difficult when, inside, she was sure she felt rather more like any member of the Lecter family did right then. Lady Murasaki was pulling off the polite ice queen rather well, and her husband seemed to be more like a regal statue she'd had accompany her. A litany of other very good looking cousins and vague relatives on Hannibal's side also seemed to be pulling off the distant but invested air. She wonderd if it was genetic.

"You want another drink?"

Alana blinked and looked to her left, startled. Beverly stood there, smiling knowingly.

"You know that's not a question you need to ask me, right?" Alana joked.

"Sure do," she patted her shoulder and weaved off through the guests, "be right back."

Scanning faces while she waited for her alcohol turned out to be a bad idea. It was inevitable that she would find them, standing together as Hannibal spoke with a group of three obvious relatives if their clothing was anything to go by. Hannibal stood in his well tailored suit of grey and mauve, demure and beautiful, and trailing off to the right stood Will, facing away from the group with his eyes trained on a group of children spinning around each other on the dance floor, laughing softly whenever any of them became dizzy enough to fall over; what made her chew at the inside of her lip was that they were almost completely ignoring one another, and yet their hands were joined, fingers interwoven. A perfect picture of managing to be alone together in a room of hundreds.

They were fucking made for each other, and she wanted to roll her eyes at her own cliched bullshit. Only it was true, and that made it worse. An odd feeling crept over her, that she too was in her own little bubble in the crowd, but she was the only one inside it. Sighing she looked down at the floor, the dancing feet in front of her. She watched them drift and click across the wood and wondered whether she should be making more of an effort. Maybe she shouldn't have even come.

"Hey."

Wishing it had been Beverly returning was too much, obviously. Alana plastered on a false smile, looked up at Will and knew it was pointless. Will could see through the facades of complete strangers; there was nothing more insulting than a friend pretending with him.

"Hey," she said in return.

He had stripped himself of the confines of his jacket, and undone the well fitting dark grey waistcoat, lying open over his shirt. It was amazing to her that just in doing so he looked so much more like her friend than the dress up doll he'd looked like when his suit was worn properly. Alana had always known Will as being fastidiously relaxed about his appearance, putting in just enough effort that he looked semi-respectable, but not enough that his clothes wouldn't be out of place on a midnight walk through the woods with his strays. She loved that

about him, she really did. He was one of the few people she knew that refused to be tempted into any sort of confines of life that didn't work with his own.

Which was why she was both resentful of his marriage, but simultaneously worried about him withering away inside of it.

"Want to get some air?" she asked transparently.

"Sure," he said, unable to stop looking happy, "I've heard the air outside is even better than in here. Can you beileve it?"

"You mean Hannibal didn't import some pure Himalayan air for his guests to breathe?" she joined in on the joke as they walked out towards the lawn beyond the fluted steps, all lit by delicate strings of white lights through the trees and burning storm lamps flickering on paving stones.

"I think I'd still prefer the Baltimore countryside," Will said, looking up at the sky as they wondered down past a few straggling couples outside sitting on wooden benches, far enough away that they were definitely separate from the proceedings; finally finding a spot he liked, Will simply sat down on the grass, knees splayed open and hands behind his back for support.

Sitting down next to him seemed elementary, even in her puporsefully expensive dress. *Actually*, she thought, *it kind of makes it better.*

"Yeah, I would," she said, "but cut mine with car fumes. I'm a city girl. Being in all this nature is bringing me out in hives."

Will's laughter was succour to her lonliness. He sounded so damned happy, genuinely fucking happy. It kind of amazed her that she'd never heard it before, that wonderful carefree element floating around his tone. When she looked to him he looked back, looked her in the eye and said six words she would never forget, even if later in life she would hate that they mocked her with their falsity.

"You saved my life, you know."

Laughing to cover not knowing what to say, "...What's that supposed to mean?" she asked.

"I've never talked to you about...about anything that showed too much of me," he kept talking as if he had finally worked up the courage over all those years, "I know you see me but I don't let anyone *see* me."

She stayed quiet, half out of disbelief and the other half worried about what she would hear.

"When I was seventeen I left home, and all home consisted of was my dad. And he was bitter. And he was alone. I left him like that and he died like that. It had all felt like bindings, cuffing me to a life serving my status, caring for my father and then marrying some reasonable suitor and...and hell I thought that was the hell I was going to get trapped into," he looked up at the sky once more, most of the stars obscured by the surrounding lights, "and I ended up trapping myself into my own little piece of hell. Repeating the sins that had come

before, forcing isolation and hating everything anyone tried to do for me. I would have ended up dead with no one to find me and put me in the ground. Nothing left but an empty house and someone else's problem. And you," he looked back at her and smiled softly, "you let me have this instead. You forced this on me before I even understood that I shouldn't hate it. I like that about you. You're unfalteringly kind."

"To a fault," she said, blinking and looking away; she didn't want him to know how stunned she was, that felt too much like a slap in the face.

"Yeah, I suppose it is," he agreed, making her sigh, "but thanks all the same."

"Asshole," she had tried to make it sounded genuine, but couldn't help the small laugh that escaped with it.

"I know," he said, smiling, "to a fault."

Things didn't have to be awkward, but then his sincerity had made it that way. She shifted about, licked her lips, deliberated with herself for a minute or two, and then asked.

"You'll be ok, won't you?"

That Will hesitated made her both worry and want to shout at him for even doing this if he had any doubts at all. Alana was beginning to worry the whole debacle had split her into two minds about everything.

"I hope so," he said with a little shrug, "I mean, it's a bit late to take it back now."

"Will..."

"Look, I want to spend the rest of my life with him and marriage is the way he wants to do that. If I have to deal with his family to make that happen, then I can be civil."

"Sometimes," she corrected.

"Sometimes," he conceeded, "I can't promise everything will always be ok, that's impossible. But I can promise you I haven't made the wrong choice."

It almost slipped out of her mouth, *'I know, I can see it when you look at each other'*. But the words stayed locked behind her teeth as he chewed at her bottom lip. All that eventually escaped was,

"You make each other happy? That will make me happy."

"I believe you," Will said, his smile turning sly and his eye narrowing, "you're not...going to have this big sister talk with Hannibal are you?"

"Hell no," she said, eyebrows lifting up towards her hairline.

Will's laughter and toothy smile couldn't help but smooth out the tumultuous feelings rattling around in her skull. Just not dispell them forever. Nothing would, she finally accepted.

The long, white corridor made her feel like she had tunnel vision. Beside her walked a man who's name she had not caught.

"No metal, no paper with staples, no objects that have not previously been vetted and approved. You stay behind the line at all times. Have you understood?"

"Yes," she said professionally.

The man set up the chair for her, for which she thanked him. Then she sat down and waited. It did not take long, just long enough for it to all sink in. Eventually he regarded her, his eyes as warm as they had ever been.

"Hello Alana, a pleasure as always," Hannibal said as he turned from his small table to greet her, placing down his blunt charcoal and wiping his hands on a wet rag which he hung from the small sink to his right.

"Dr. Lecter," she said, "how are you?"

"Muddling through," he said as he stood, noticeably keeping his right shoulder stiff as he pulled his chair out and sat, facing her, "but then aren't we all?"

She simply nodded because it was all she could think to do. She placed her things onto the ground by her feet, *a thematic apperception test the FBI required for their case.* Volunteering had been elementary, mainly so she could get a chance to…

What? She thought, *Ask him what?* Now that she was here, her words seemed dry and whispering, like ashes floating above a fire. Everything was suddenly so very real, not words on a page or pictures on a photograph.

"I assume this is not a friendly visit?" Hannibal asked; she couldn't fathom how he still remained so utterly the same, *the same as she'd always seen him*.

"More of a house call," she said, clearing her throat.

"I see," he nodded, "no small talk then?"

"Would you like there to be?"

"You would," he said, face placid, open.

She wanted to scream at him. She wanted to hit him. She wanted him to take it back, to take it all back. She wanted none of this to be real. She wanted Hannibal not to be a liar. She wanted Will to be alright.

“We don’t always get what we want,” she said, picking up the test once more as if it were a physical form of her own inner decision.

“You always were one for the blunt truth. I appreciate that. May I ask..?”

“No,” she shook her head, cutting him off, “I can’t talk to you Hannibal. I’m here to run this test, then I probably won’t see you for a while.”

No reaction. The want to scream rose again, *pictures of blood and bone and sinew and organs missing and organs eaten and dear god, dear god, dear god.* They went through the test, although she already knew it was a joke. Hannibal was too sophisticated for such a basic probing into his psyche. Too intelligent to let slip what they wanted to hear, but sick enough to make up something entertaining . He knew he was caught, so why not have fun with it? *Why not, indeed?* She asked herself as she mechanically noted down what she needed, recording the rest.

When it was done, she reached out and clicked the recorder off. Only she did not rise from her chair. She stayed, staring at him.

“Hoping to ferret out everything you need?” Hannibal asked her, sitting comfortably in his chair as if they were simply talking in his office, surrounded by walls of books, the smell of leather from the chairs, the slight echo from the Georgian architecture.

“If only it were that simple,” she smiled wryly, “we wouldn’t even be in this situation, would we?”

“Trying to say you would have done it differently, had you known? Now where’s the fun in this? Regrets that can’t be absorbed should be discarded.”

“All we have is our regrets,” she said quickly, “you’ve made it so there’s nothing left to hold onto.”

Everything was very quiet here. Sterile, disgustingly so. She wondered how he could stand it, she barely could. *Why did you come here?* She asked herself angrily. When Hannibal sat forwards in his chair, clasping his hands together, she knew what he wanted. She knew and yet was unsure whether or not to give it to him, because there was no way to know what reaction it would garner. When he spoke, Alana wished that she could not hear, that she could put her hands over her ears and keep the words from finding her mind.

“Guilt does not suit you, Alana,” he noted, “although you have much to feel guilty about.”

“I don’t feel guilty for your deeds,” she said, unable to help over annunciating her words, tone deep and hurt, unable to pull back, “and neither does *he*.”

“Will understands,” Hannibal said, “perhaps more so than you know.”

“Don’t say his name,” she shook her head, unable to hide her resentment, her guilt, “it’s unfair and uncouth.”

“I hope he does not judge me too harshly,” he said genuinely, making Alana shake with anger; she could feel it in her shoulders, clasping her hands so as to hide it as best she could, “I never was allowed time to explain. You robbed me of that.”

“How dare you,” she shook her head, well aware of how his placid demeanour had changed to that of an intense predatory stare, “you nearly killed him. You lying piece of shit.”

“How rude,” Hannibal noted, his tone sending a shiver through her that she wished didn’t feel as if he had touched her, touched her skin, “considering it is coming from the people that stole his future from him.”

“Goodbye, Doctor Lecter,” she said, feeling out of breath as she stood, gathering her things to her.

He did not call out after her. All that followed was her hurried heels, clicking to the doorway where she banged three times. She practically threw the ‘Visitor’ badge back in Chilton’s face when he asked her, with a smug smile, how the session had gone. The file in her hands was thrown carelessly into the passenger seat before she backed up with reckless abandon, peeling out onto the road. She didn’t care to acknowledge the hollow feeling in her chest as Will’s words from years before crawled into her mind and sat there like a testament to the truth.

Sometimes I get the feeling we’re just two bits of debris, caught in his tide...I’ve never known who I am more than when I’m with him.

Wishing that it weren’t true would never be enough. Their scars had the ability to remind them that the past was real, with or without their consent. Still, his words stung close to home. Alana Bloom did what she did best, in these sorts of situations. She ignored it.

Reality/Mask

Chapter Summary

> “Most people would have run screaming from day one. I’m well aware of my own failings. I’m all bad dreams and raw angles, cutting through bone and brain. Sometimes I’m not myself, and sometimes I am and that’s worse. Why,” Will asked again, “are you still here?"

Chapter Notes

> Well, it's been a while. Sorry for the hiatus. I hope this chapter gives a bit of light relief considering the state of the world at the moment. Stay safe, everyone!

The walls seemed...empty. Which was odd. He had never thought that he would consider paint on a wall to seem empty, but now it did. And his rooms were beginning to feel empty too. Well, not empty, just sparse, maybe.

Will was thinking about whether or not to bring in a couple more chairs to the living room. He only had two. To be fair he had never really bothered to think about why there weren’t more, he had the room for them after all. Alright, not that he hadn’t thought why, more that he hadn’t ever taken the time to dwell on the subject.

If he wanted to dwell on it the answer would quickly present itself.

Still.

Now he was here, in his sparse room, staring at his wall from one of his two chairs, vaguely wondering whether or not he could really even cook a decent meal for more than just himself from his tiny stove and broken oven that he was only half way through fixing. That he didn’t have a guest room, or extra place to sleep. That, even if he did, there wouldn’t be anyone to have to worry about accommodating for anyway.

Which was why he didn’t dwell on the little things. They all led to the same place.

“So why the hell are you even thinking about it then?” he muttered to himself through the fingers pressed against his lips.

He sighed, deep and slow, holding the breath for as long as he could before releasing. It wasn’t supposed to have happened like this. He was sure it wasn’t, right? Not that he had any

personal experience to explain why, just...just that he was sure *he* should be able to weather this better. Move on with his life and stop thinking about the god damned walls and chairs and oven and everything else that led on from there.

At work people had started to notice his aberrant behaviour.

“You’re not concentrating,” Jack had said as they stood back, allowing a group of students to filter past.

“I know,” Will had replied; he had given up on any pretence, it was easier.

“I can’t have you fifty percent, Will, not right now,” Jack had said sternly, following as Will grabbed his things messily and started for the exit of the lecture hall.

“I know,” he had said again, tightly.

“This is all because of...” Jack had started to say tersely.

“*I know*,” Will had cut him off.

Cut him off because, for one, it wasn’t something he wanted broadcast for all to hear, and, for two, because it was true.

Itchy feeling, at the base of his neck. He scratched at it absently and continued to stare. When the sounds of paws at the door, followed by yelping barks, pulled him from his introspection he felt like he wasn’t sure how much time had really passed. Even looking at the clock didn’t help. Had it been less than an hour? He wondered as he shovelled kibble and emptied tins, chopping up the jelly and meat roughly. Had it been more than an hour..? Surely not. Right?

Sitting out on the steps as the mutts ate noisily on the porch, all jostling for position, Will nursed a whiskey and started ahead at the trees without truly seeing them. They moved lazily in the wind, swaying, leaves and boughs. Before, when he’d first run to Wolf Trap it had felt like a sanctuary, a secluded den for hidden thoughts to live without raising hell with any neighbours. Now all Will saw was the wall of trees, keeping the world from view. As he sat, staring, he didn’t notice the wind at all.

Eventually he felt something against his left arm, looking there to see Winston sitting by him, sniffing at his leg. He patted the dog on the neck and put his glass down, face falling and a welling dread pitting out his stomach. All of his well practiced routines that he had collected and moulded into an existence he had protected at all costs now seemed like nothing but bookends for an empty, sparse life. It was a terrible feeling to realise that the tight knit little reality you’d worked so hard to construct, every small detail, every living thing within the structure carefully placed at arms length, was coming to a slow, crumbling demise.

He shouldn’t be drinking, not tonight.

Will felt lonely.

“...and would I dare to even *say* it, but you’re distracted, aren’t you. Are you even listening to me now? Hannibal?”

The mention of his name grabbed his attention, which had previously, uncharacteristically, been floating elsewhere. He blinked, once, to focus his eyes and looked up demurely to the woman at the other side of the table.

Bedelia Du Maurier had a knowing smile on her red painted lips. He disliked that smile for its self-congratulatory nature, but also for what it told him. He had slipped. As he stalled, taking a sip of wine and letting the gentle hum of the restaurant come back into focus around him, Hannibal licked his lips and smirked.

“There are only so many marriage proposal stories I can listen to before they homogenise into one,” he said, “apologies if I am not willing to store all of the details, they would take up too much space.”

“Ah, very smooth,” she smiled with teeth, “but that was the topic of conversation five minutes ago. We, or well I had already moved on to your aunt’s new venture project before changing the topic to why we even came out at all tonight, considering you never let anyone else cook for you.”

Hannibal cleared his throat and sniffed, wiping at a minute mote of debris on the pristine white tablecloth.

“Will you be diagnosing me, doctor?” he asked conceitedly.

“Oh, I’m always diagnosing you,” she said with a soft shrug, “you just have no idea because I’d never tell you. So are you going to tell me, or do I need to lie you down on my couch and ask you about your mother?”

“How crass,” Hannibal replied, “I’d rather you always spoke your mind with me. I had the notion we were friends. Friends always tell the truth, don’t they?”

“Absolutely not,” she said as she motioned to the nearest waiter for the cheque, “opposite most of the time.”

“White lies transcend true falsehoods.”

“So you mean I should be ignoring your rude behaviour? That seems unfair,” as the waiter brought the bill she opened her purse and paid before Hannibal could interject; he couldn’t resist tightening his jaw and looking away in displeasure, knowing now that she was purposefully needling him, “I thought we were friends.”

“How droll.”

“So are you going to tell me about him or not?”

“I doubt I need to,” Hannibal said as he stood, smoothing out his tie before offering her an arm; after a slight hesitation she took it, slotting her elbow into his, “you are always so well informed. I think maybe we should reverse the situation? Why don’t you tell me about him.”

She didn't speak again until they had reached the Bentley. Hannibal waited, he was an expert at waiting, even if tonight he did feel the itch of impatience scratching at his resolve. As he pulled out into the sparse traffic on Lancaster Street she watched the cars pass by, and he watched the road roll beneath them.

"I've heard he's omega," she started bluntly, "where did you meet?"

"At a party for a mutual friend," Hannibal decided to compromise.

"And?" she pressed.

"And he was...intriguing," Hannibal answered.

"I wouldn't have pegged you for a love at first sight type," she scoffed amicably.

Part of him wished to resist the need to, but another small part relished the laugh he let slip. It was throaty but soft, genuine. They stopped at a red light facing an avenue of yew trees that danced merrily in the breeze. When he looked to her she seemed baffled and startled for a few seconds before composing herself.

"Infatuation, love, lust," he said with amusement, "these labels you apply with such authority. No wonder your patients resent your treatment."

"No one resents me, Hannibal," she said dryly, "you've been acting so strangely, its always easier to apply broad brushstrokes at first before narrowing down the problem. So, you met him at a party, and he intrigued you. He's an FBI agent, isn't he?"

"No, he's not."

"Semantics, Hannibal."

"The meaning of life itself is nestled away in semantics, my dear Bedelia, do not dismiss them," he said softly, "he's an interesting young man. Interesting people are difficult to find. Why are you so interested in my interest?"

"Friends ask friends about new relationships."

"You've used the word friend so many times now it's beginning to lose its meaning," he said with a slight smile at Bedelia's sharp side glance, "it's not a relationship."

"Oh, really?"

"Sleeping together doesn't make a relationship," Hannibal said, knowing the reaction it would garner, "I'm glad to find Will isn't the sort of fool to think so either."

"You've *slept* with him? Christ," she sighed, "so that's the catch, is it? This is why your aunt hasn't left me alone for weeks. And despite your behaviour tonight," she said with an acid touch, "I'm able to be discreet. Would you like me to tell her or not?"

“Makes no difference to me,” Hannibal said, cavalier, “she doesn’t factor as heavily into this as she thinks she does.”

The car was quiet for another few minutes as Hannibal navigated his way through the familiar tree lined streets, passing the small gardens and large town houses in the growing gloom of evening. When he rolled in up the crunching driveway and pulled up the handbrake Bedelia was smiling to herself.

“This is the most serious I’ve ever seen you. Should I be worried for him or not?”

“You will understand when you meet him, I’m sure,” Hannibal said, feeling the pull of his wandering attention, tempting him into another reverie about soft, chestnut curls and a stoic face covering acerbic humour and grey eyes behind glasses that stopped the darkness from leaking out, “Will can take care of himself.”

“You know it’s not a great idea to decide to come off your meds without consulting a physician first,” the doctor said, even though her tone held none of the conviction that her words did.

“Right,” Will said routinely.

“Especially after, yeesh,” she raised her brows as she looked at the computer screen, her glasses reflecting the extensive notes and warnings there, “that many years. So what symptoms have you been getting?”

“Uh,” he cleared his throat, “nausea, low mood, um, I guess the typical ones.”

“Could you elaborate? I need to make sure *I’m* diagnosing you, ok?”

Will bit his tongue and nodded. This was the last place he’d wanted to come, but his life was becoming unbearable. As he rattled off his problems to the doctor and watched her type them in, blasting them indelibly onto his file, it only made it all the more real.

“Trouble sleeping, uh, waking up with a dry mouth, night sweats, inability to concentrate...” he slowed to a stop as he realised she was watching him with a small smile, “...what?” he asked tersely.

“May I ask, Mr Graham, why you stopped taking your suppressants?”

“Work related,” he said, erecting the words like a wall.

“Ok,” she said, typing again, “can we just update your personal info while you’re here? It’s been a while since you last had an appointment, ok, so,” she proceeded before Will could speak, “still living in Wolf Trap, off the Beltway?”

“Yes.”

“Phone number still end in 597?”

“Yes.”

“Relationship status still single?”

“Yes.”

“Ok. All up to date,” but she looked justified, somehow, and Will disliked it, it made him feel oddly judged, “some of your symptoms are pretty standard, your body is adjusting to living without the Antryphodene. Honestly if you didn’t come off it for a good reason, you should have taken the next dose as soon as you could. Now that it’s out of your system, going back on it is going to take a little time, it takes longer to get back into your system than it does to get out.”

“Fine...” Will started to get up.

“But you’re only making it worse, with whoever they are,” she said as she typed out the prescription.

“...I’m...I’m not...” Will was disgusted with himself that he couldn’t get the words out without tripping all over himself.

“It's not my job to judge you, Mr. Graham,” she said as the printer spat out the prescription like it tasted bad; she handed it over and Will avoided her eyes, snatching the paper and zipping up his jacket, “just to give you some advice. Not all your symptoms are from Antryphodene withdrawal. If this person is waking you up at night in sweats and leaving you with a dry mouth, I think they might be for you.”

He sat in the pharmacy, fists balled in his lap, furious. Who the hell did she think she was? Another Dynamics sycophant, wanting to see him mated off to some Alpha so he could be *proper*. All so Hannibal fucking Lecter could get whatever he wanted, the way things *aught* to be, the status quo, his life being ruled by biology and bureaucracy. He was sure Lecter would be demure as ever in denying any truth to all of this, he was sure he would do that slight-smile, tip his head and claim no such intention.

It was as Will realised he was muttering all of this to himself under his breath, enough that the person seated next to him had stood up and walked away to fake looking at some constipation medication, that it all suddenly became less torturous and more hilarious. He sat for another ten minutes, struggling not to laugh at himself until his name was called and he could pick up his pills and leave.

“Christ, Graham,” he said to himself as he sat in his truck and quickly downed an Antryphodene, finding it difficult to swallow through the infectious giggling, “you’re a walking headcase, you know that?”

Looking at his phone only heightened his hysteria. There, in a bold message, read:

Dinner, tonight, 6:30pm, your presence requested, Hannibal.

“Good luck with that,” he told the phone categorically before stuffing it into his pocket, driving home and promptly falling asleep until eight thirty.

“I think you should invite Dr. Lecter in on the team. Officially.”

She had known the dangerous silence that would follow, but it had come to the point where pride was either going to come before a fall or before stepping over the thing that was clearly about to trip you. Alana twirled her pen so as to avoid looking Jack Crawford in the eye, enjoying the glint of the setting sun on the pen’s sleek surface. Eventually she heard a chair creak and glanced up, seeing Jack leaning back, hands on the chair arms, mouth a thin line.

“You’re not even going to ask me why?” she finally offered.

“I know why,” Jack sighed tightly, “I was just...seeing how long I could ignore it until someone else brought it up.”

“It’s not Will’s fault.”

“Never said it was.”

“You didn’t have to,” Alana said with a raised brow; she shoved away the stupid guilt that nipped at her, considering she was chastising Jack for feelings she too was trying to ignore.

It had been three weeks since the incident, which she felt foolish for calling it but it was the only thing she could think of that didn’t need going into more detail to explain. Three weeks since Hannibal had made his intentions blatantly clear in regards to Will. Also three weeks since Will Graham had not made his intentions clear at all about what the hell he was going to do about it. Ostrich with its head in the sand wasn’t a good place for Will, Alana had found out the hard way.

“It’s never going to work unless you bring him in,” Alana shrugged, putting her pen down on the desk, “either you bring Lecter in so Will can concentrate for more than five minutes at a time or...”

“I know what or,” Jack bit out, “I am *not* letting Will skulk back to that fucking teaching post. Waste of good resources.”

“You have already been consulting Lecter on the Ripper case, it’s not a far stretch to get him a temp pass so he can...I don’t know,” what the hell would she even call it? “accompany Will? He’s come in a couple of times to help examine wound structures and cadavers hasn’t he? It’s really not that much of a stretch.”

“I brought him in on the hotel murders, that crazy shit with the organ harvesting. They saw each other then. What’s the problem?”

“Really, Jack? Really?”

“This is insane,” Jack was shaking his head, “Will’s gone back on his meds right?”

“*Jack*,” Alana frowned, eyes dark.

“Christ, alright.”

“Do you want the Dynamics HR just sniffing around the department or do you want them directly up your ass? At this point it’s your call. They don’t care when you put Will at risk by exposing him to all this horror, but they’ll care as soon as you get between and alpha and an omega who are clearly in the process of bonding. I mean are you really that jealous?”

“*Jealous?”*Jack scoffed, “Alana, I thought you were smart. I don’t want to fuck him, I want him to keep working here!”

“Jealousy isn’t always sexual Jack. You’re jealous, and the sooner you admit it the sooner you can get the hell over it.”

As soon as the words had left her mouth she felt like swallowing them back down her throat. *They stung at her like a particularly spiteful wasp.* You can be the bigger person, she thought to herself even as she cursed her rotten luck that she was having to mediate the one thing that drove her crazy.

Hannibal Lecter falling in love with Will Graham.

He’d been getting looks. Looks he could ignore. *Greedy eyes, cloying their sudden lust all over his body*. Who gave a shit.

Comments were trickier, unless they were only heard by him, then it was simpler to pretend they were just, well, audible *looks*.

“Available now, huh?” Purnell passed by, taller than him by a good four inches, leaned in and grinned as he said, ‘Bout time.”

Available to kick your balls up into your throat, Will thought lividly, shying away from the man with shoulders stiff and teeth grinding as he hunched forwards and quickened his step. It was difficult not to feel the slick revulsion, and hiding beneath it the flickering of arousal desperate to ignite. It sickened him.

So much for not giving a shit, he thought facetiously, rounding the corner and hurrying through the open plan office area, trying his best to keep from touching anyone. In only marginally worked. Will realised he’d been prioritising rushing over watching where the hell he was going, slamming his whole left side into someone before he could stop.

“Gees, I’m really sorry!” the man said, reaching out to steady Will before he fell.

His body went rigid, pulse spiking, pupil’s dilating, *feeling the touch of skin*.

“...hands, off...me,” he had tried to say but came out as nothing but a wheeze.

“Are you ok?” the man said, looking genuinely concerned.

“Get your...” Will grit his teeth and shook his head, pulling away from the man with a frantic shake that was enough to garner the attention of those around them, “get your fucking hands off of me!”

And the shout was just to let everyone else know then, was it? He thought to himself as he ran, basically sprinted, to the elevator, pushing the button while he clutched at his jacket, holding it closed, murmuring to himself, *‘come on, come on’*. The ding of arrival was the sweetest sound he’d heard all day. Will squeezed into the elevator, finding it blessedly empty, and clicked for basement level 2 before slumping against the side wall. The slight jump in his stomach as he began his descent only highlighted the already budding nausea. His hands were shaking as he covered his face, breathing erratic. His skin was hot to the touch. Things had escalated so quickly, he hadn’t thought it would get this bad. When he pulled his hands away from his face he stared at his palms, blinking rapidly.

“Fuck, *fuck*,” he whispered, “what is happening to me?”

When the elevator slowed to a stop Will automatically made for the door, only to find someone else walking in. He jerked back, glancing at the buttons; *only the 1st floor.* Then he recognised the new addition to his elevator sanctuary and cursed.

“Graham,” Conrad wasn’t tall and looming, like Purnell, but he was broad shouldered and had never known the meaning of personal space.

“Conrad,” he ground out in response as he leaned back against the wall.

“Seems rumours were true then,” Conrad smiled into his file folder, giving Will the side eye.

“Oh?” Will smirked, “You mean the one about you having sex with all those corpses?”

“You’re a sick fuck, you know that?” Conrad didn’t look put out at all; Will faltered and tried to see which floor they were on.

“Then why the hell are you talking to me?” Will asked, his voice strained, “Willing to sink that low are you?”

“On any other day, not a chance,” Purnell gave him a look of disdain, even as his blue eyes trailed Will up and down, “today..?”

“Give me a fucking break,” Will snarled out, feeling an intense relief as the doors opened with a mechanical whirr, allowing his escape.

The doors slid shut and Will felt himself sag, his breathing unsteady as he rubbed at his chest, then his neck, then at the *itch* there, scratching. Shit, this is fucking out of control, he thought shakily, I just need to...need to keep...

His feet seemed to know better than to let him stand there and dig himself into a frantic mess. Forced him to turn and head to his destination. He breathed in deep, letting out slow, tasting the chemical air of the morgue on his sensitive tongue.

When he finally pushed inside no one gave him a second glance, except Beverly Katz who, after a short frown, turned her eyes back to Jack. Will leaned against the wall in ‘his spot’ and pushed his glasses up his nose, trying to pick up on the conversation. His head was swimming. *Just breathe nice and slow, calm down*, he repeated over and over.

“...found at the Point, just like this, or as much as we could considering...”

Will closed his eyes and put his palms flat against the cool wall behind him, trying to centre himself.

“Considering the elaborate display,” Beverly said with chuff of derisive laughter, “honestly I get the feeling the Ripper does this to piss off the morticians that have to transport his cadavers intact.”

“Well that’s nice,” Jimmy grinned morbidly, “he’s thinking of us.”

The steady breathing wasn’t working. The world was spinning like the waltzers at the fairground, as if he were being thrown against gravity only to be pulled back again and again.

“Can it, you two,” Jack said tightly, “I need everyone to focus on this, gather as much evidence as we can in the next five hours so we can pass on what’s needed for the other departments. I got us priority, as usual, but it doesn’t last forever, kiddos. And you...”

Will had been finding it difficult enough to focus when he wasn’t involved in the conversation. Now, with Jack’s full attention on him, Will felt everything come to its peak. He opened his eyes and tried to focus. The lights seemed to dim and then fluoresce. He could see Jack’s face, see his mouth move, but nothing audible made it past the high pitched wail in his ears. When he felt his eyes roll up into his head Will knew, somewhere on the other side of his sheer panic, he was never going to live this down.

He didn’t remember hitting the floor.

It had been forty minutes. Forty whole minutes of Jack Crawford cussing himself out for being such an idiot.

“Has he said anything else?” Jack asked, unable to loosen his tone from anything but taught as a piano wire.

“Not since,” Beverly shrugged.

“I need you to be taking this more seriously Katz,” he said authoritatively.

“Who says I’m not,” she replied, “but help is on its way, right? Will knows what he’s doing.”

Forty whole minutes since he’d walked out of the first aid room for two minutes to talk to the doctor before returning to find the door locked. He had tried it once more, shocked into believing he surely just wasn’t doing it right. Surely. It took rattling the handle to finally sink in that he’d made a mistake in thinking Graham was still asleep when he left him.

"*Will? Christ, Graham open this door!" he had demanded.*

"*Jack, I need you to do something for me," came the muffled reply.*

"*In case you hadn't noticed I'm the one calling the shots around here," Jack had said, irritated and caustic, "this had better be good Graham, or I swear to god you're in for a world of trouble."*

"*I need you to call Lecter. Have him come here."*

"*Lecter? What, why?" Jack asked even though he knew the answer and it grated against already raw nerves.*

"*Just do it. Please. Please, Jack, I just...don't ask."*

Forty three minutes now. It seemed like this wouldn't all just go away after all. He had hoped, hoped so long and hard that this infatuation would simply fizzle out like a damp squib. Had been so sure he could rely on Will's utter resolve in the area of relationships, that of having none whatsoever. It made him a great profiler: no family to worry about, keep his mind on the game. Graham was his to control, his to utilise. Or he had been. Now, standing in front of the cream coloured door it felt nastily symbolic of he and Graham's working relationship. Especially when the true barrier itself arrived.

"Agent Crawford."

Lecter was dressed rather casually, for him. No flamboyant suit today. Instead a pair of neat black trousers beneath a white shirt mostly hidden under a ribbed, zip up grey cardigan made the Doctor look almost human like the rest of them. Somehow that served only to put Jack's back up even more. *Couldn't he just stay the preternatural being he always deigned himself to be, untouchable and flawless?*

"Doctor Lecter," he said, trying his best to stem the venom, "thank you for coming at such short notice."

"Not at all," Lecter inclined his head, "I do requests, when necessary."

"Oh it's necessary alright."

Soft knocking at the door let him know who was there even before…

"Will? May I come in?"

For a moment he hesitated, unsure. You asked him to come, Will berated himself. The consequences were already set in motion. He hadn't seen the man since their last run in at the hotel, corpse in a bathtub, botched organ harvest; Will remembered a quick dinner and some rather heated fumbling that ended in Will making excuses to leave before anyone could call themselves satisfied. Things were still rather raw, wretched. The words of the doctor he had visited haunted him, telling him he couldn't blame all his symptoms on withdrawal. Will hated it.

“A minute,” he mumbled, swallowing; it took a little while for him to work up the energy to stand, shuffle to the door and unlock it, “give me a minute.”

He braced for Jack to barge in and raise hell. Instead the door opened quietly and Hannibal stepped in before turning to lock the door behind him. He was so close, suddenly, and it was overwhelming. Will looked up, glassy eyed, and blinked as Hannibal reached out to steady him. He doubted that Lecter had been expecting Will’s response, Will barely did himself.

“Don’t *touch* me,” he bit out, growling as he pulled away from the grasping hand and shoved at the man’s chest; only there was no strength in his arms, and Lecter was a steel wall in comparison, “You planned this. All of *this*.”

“I’m here to help you, Will,” was the calm, measured response.

“You’re here to help yourself,” Will spat, backing up on wobbling legs to lean against the first aid cot.

“I do believe you invited me,” Lecter rationalised as he approached slowly, eyes intent on Will, never wavering.

“Didn’t have a choice,” Will ground out, looking down and watching as Hannibal’s shoes stepped into view; when the doctor put the back of his hand to Will’s forehead he had no strength to fight back.

“You have a fever,” Hannibal stated.

“I’m aware,” Will sighed, defeated, his need to fight dwindling, “you...fucking, just please don’t make me...”

“Make you what?”

“...Beg,” Will ground out, finally managing to raise a dark and dangerous stare to level at the unperturbed doctor.

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” Lecter was smiling.

“Here,” Will crooked his finger and Hannibal complied, gathering Will into his arms; Will leaned into the embrace and shivered violently, settling his face into the crook of Hannibal’s neck “*jesus,”* he felt shaky and absurd as Hannibal lifted him to sit on the side of the cot, his nerves fizzing, “this is fucking crazy.”

“Tell me what you need,” Hannibal spoke into his ear before lowering his mouth to the neck Will didn’t even realise he’d bared, running sharp canines over soft flesh.

“You know what I...want.”

“Oh?”

“I’m not begging you, you fu...” the curse converted into an indecent moan as Hannibal's long fingers appeared at his thigh; Will clamped his right hand over his mouth as he leaned

back on the left.

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” Lecter purred.

Will was almost sure he could feel the man smiling against his flesh.

On exiting the infirmary room, Hannibal Lecter made one last check of his clothing. Everything in place. His hair had been quickly combed back to its intense neatness. Had made sure no marks were showing. Everything in order.

Jack was missing on his return to the room down the hall, clearly a waiting or eating area of some sort with its nestles of chairs and tables. Instead he found Katz sitting back in a chair on her phone, looking as if she were simply on break. Yet Hannibal was a creature of detail, if nothing else, and he could read her worry in the tightness of her crossed legs and the slight stiffness of her posture.

“Jack?” Hannibal asked.

“Whisked away by Diane from HR. It was only a matter of time really. How’s Will?” she asked casually.

“As well as can be expected,” Hannibal gave away very little for free; Katz shot him a look that told him she wasn’t interested in playing his games, “the doctor may need to take a look at him again, he has a nasty bump on his head.”

“Yeah, he wasn’t exactly graceful when he fell over.”

“Of course,” Hannibal said with a knowing smile; from the fall, of course.

“Not interested in explaining, are you,” she said, not a question.

“I have never been in the habit of breaking doctor patient confidentiality, Ms. Katz.”

“He’s right you know,” Beverly looked up at him, uncrossing her legs and stuffing her phone in her pocket; her eyes were bright but not entirely accusatory, “this is your fault.”

“Something Will said?” Hannibal inclined his head to the right.

“He doesn’t have to.”

“I see.”

“One thing you can tell me, doctor,” she said, her sincerity tantalising in its purity, “you’re not messing with him, are you? All this is going somewhere. Cause if it’s not, there are people who can make this rouse you have going very difficult.”

Hannibal smiled broadly, “I do believe you are threatening me.”

“You’re not as dumb as people say.”

“People do not say that,” Hannibal tutted, “but you can rest your head easy on your pillow. My intentions with Will are sacrosanct.”

“Ok. Good. That’s all I wanted to hear,” she stood to leave, smiled to herself, and turned back, “by the way, you have a little something,” she said, unable to hide her mirth as she pointed to the right corner of her mouth.

“Ah, thank you,” Hannibal said, raising his brows and nodding in appreciation, whipping a handkerchief from his pocket and wiping away the offending evidence.

“Not even a blush,” Beverly mused hopelessly as she sauntered from the room.

Hannibal tracked down the resident physician and had them take another look at Will. It was difficult to stem the smile as the doctor admitted that the fall must have been more damaging than she first realised as she examined the back of Will’s skull, even with the sour glare Will was shooting him. They had been a little rough with each other, he would admit. Will tended to bring out his animalistic side. Eventually the doctor left with the intention to return with medication after consulting with their Dynamics specialist. The sour look refused to leave Will’s eye.

“What did Jack say?” Will asked, eyes closed as he rubbed at his head gingerly.

“He was nowhere to be found,” Hannibal said, garnering Will attention, “already being roasted by your delightful human resources department.”

“Ah. Ok. Why were you gone so long?”

“Ah dear Will, you missed me,” Hannibal said, enjoying Will’s roll of the eyes while Hannibal held his wrist delicately and kept time with his watch, “your pulse is sufficiently normal. They will check your blood pressure when they return.”

“Can’t we just...” Will started strong but seemed to lose confidence part way through; Hannibal simply watched him until Will sighed, keeping his eyes from Hannibal’s sincere stare, “can’t we just be gone by then?”

“You wish to flee the hoards of the Dynamics department?”

“Wouldn’t you?” Will scoffed, “I’m serious. If I asked you to get me the hell out of here, would you?”

The thought of refusing passed through his mind. It would be interesting to see how Will handled explaining his presence to officials who could validate Hannibal’s own need to be a constant during Will’s time at the BAU. Lots of *official* access that would surely prove very useful. However, Will could also make himself a thorn in his side, if necessary. He knew Will could be a darkly spiteful creature when he wanted to be, and when paired with his startling intelligence it always transformed into something inventive and surprising. It was something Hannibal adored about him. Still. Hannibal could wait just a little longer for his coveted access to the BAU’s secrets.

“Your wish,” Hannibal picked up Will’s jacket, dusting it down with a couple of broad smacks before handing it to Will, “my command.”

“I’ll remember that,” Will said with a wry smirk, taking his jacket and standing up as best he could, “for later.”

Thinking back to their first encounter, Hannibal felt elated. Such progress Will had made in such a short period of time. It had been almost painful, the level of shy underconfidence Will battled, not understanding his own natural beauty, the sensuality of his own delicate purity decaying into the filthy pitch of human baseness, the savagery lying caustic and beautiful hidden just beneath his fragile skin.

Now Will was always the first to offer up pieces of himself for consumption. Sometimes it was difficult to discern whether it was entirely conscious or not, whether Will trusted him or simply enjoyed manipulating him. A thin line between them, a vein of red, leaching back and forth, tit for tat.

It had taken very few interactions between them for Will to start listening to his own intuition rather than his inner demons. The thought always made Hannibal’s blood run hot and strong. Seeing him swallowed by his instincts, allowing his body to move without prejudice or fear, eyes open to soak in the truth of who he was...

...it gave Hannibal a sense of hope he had not garnered for an age.

Houses gave way to scrub gave way to trees. The escape from the oppression of Crawford and the red tape of the BAU became an escape from the grasping need of the urban. As they approached the turn off for Wolf Trap Will, slouching in the passenger seat, lifted his hand and motioned ahead.

“Keep driving,” was all he would say.

Hannibal was too curious to deny the whim. Wheels rolled on, only turning when directed; *second right, take this exit, straight ahead, you can stop at the top of the track*. Will’s directions were concise but with a hint of shiver. Nerves. Hannibal refused to speculate where this was going. He didn’t want to ruin the surprise.

The trees surrounding the small dirt patch that seemed to pass as a car park were a mix of silver birch and conifer. In the early evening light they shone, outlined in gold. As he unbuckled and exited the car, Will’s hair shone with a similar halo. Hannibal took a moment to appreciate the sight.

“It’s about twenty minutes. Follow me.”

Not for the first time Hannibal wished that black dress shoes were better when traversing pine needles and tree roots. He ran into similar problems during the hunt. Sometimes, he admitted with a small ticking smile, he allowed fashion over function, even in the most unreasonable positions. Still, he found himself able to keep up with Will’s figure, cut in denim and forest green as if to meld with his surroundings. The world smelled of peat moss

and decaying vegetation. A hint of honey, from the spring blooms upon bulbous bushes. Air fresh enough to cut against his teeth.
Will stayed quiet. They seemed to speak only in crunching footsteps and snapping twigs. He was glad he had worn his black leather gloves, for when he needed to hold his balance against the trees or climb fallen logs. Truthfully he wished he'd brought a coat. Spring in Maryland was nothing if not crisp.

Eventually the rustle of something other than the breeze through budding leaves became apparent. Water over stone, water against rock, water cascading, water pooling. As they made their way down a steep bank, using a rough cut path through the boulders and trying to avoid damaging the young saplings, Hannibal was greeted by the meandering waters of the Patapsco river. It was a broad section, filled with rubble rocks and shining pebbles at the bed, thigh deep in places, no more than your ankle in others. Will hadn't stopped at the bottom of the embankment, instead walking directly to the river's edge, hands in his pockets. After a moment, Hannibal joined him. They stood, listening to the tumbling bustle of the living river, hustling past them like a constant.

"Thanks, I mean," Will cleared his throat, looking down, eyes twitching before he raised his head, keeping his gaze on the far bank, "thank you."

"For causing you constant issues at your workplace?" Hannibal said with humour.

"For coming when I needed you to," Will said sincerely, "I..." he frowned, "don't have anyone else I would ask to do the things that you do."

"I would hope not," Hannibal set about rubbing his gloved hands together, hoping to gather some warmth; it was satisfying that his comment at least garnered a smile and a soft laugh from Will, ducking his head and kicking a stone into the passing waters with a subtle plop.

"So possessive," Will said wryly.

"You have no idea," Hannibal smiled; the noisy silence of their environment returned. Eventually Hannibal knew if he didn't speak they could be there till nightfall, "may I ask why we are here?"

"I come here when I..." Will seemed to get stuck on the word, clearing his throat, "...when coping isn't an option. Did I ever tell you I like to fish?"

"I'm sure you've mentioned it in passing," Hannibal lied; many times now he had snooped through Will's house while the man was absent, absorbing all the secrets he could find. It was important to remember which had been given willingly, and which he had stolen.

"This is the, well, this is where I come to...do that. Yikes, that sounds massively uninteresting now that I say it out loud. What I think I'm trying to do here is," Will cleared his throat again, looking down into the water, the smallest cluster of uncertain wrinkles by his eyes, "introduce you, I guess."

The sun was beginning to dip into the trees, heading towards the mountains. Part of Hannibal was tempted to suggest starting back before the darkness made their return journey miserable

and dangerous. The more dominant part was glowing with opportunity. Will Graham was bearing his wild soul, and Hannibal thought he could feel hooves against the fertile ground, antlers in the brush, beady eyes, paws running, creatures of the forest, hearts beating in synchronicity with this consecrated river. And Will there among them, sitting amid the pagan reality like a fairy tale monster.

“You fish to feel the thrill of the hunt?” Hannibal asked because he knew it was untrue.

Will shook his head and swallowed, “So I can forget it. Everyone forgets when they lose themselves in something. You can...” again he paused as if somewhere Will was asking himself if this was a good idea. His eyes seemed slightly glassy, far off, his voice soft, “...make it all go away. Put your head back, close your eyes. Wade out into the stream.”

“Tranquil,” Hannibal said, feeling no need to be insincere when offered something with such candour.

Will nodded, but still seemed anxious. Hesitant. Overhead the sky was dipping to azure. At the far end of the tree line the north star was becoming visible. The caste of Will’s face was sinking into shadow. Hannibal looked to the far bank, mirroring Will’s stance.

“Composing is my escape,” he offered; the transforming of swine into great art was not a hobby Will was ready for. Not yet, “it is necessary to start with a mind void of needs and wants in order for true creation to occur. Allowing for truth to emerge. Only then do we see ourselves as we truly are.”

That Will was watching him when Hannibal returned his gaze to the man wasn’t entirely unexpected; the intensity was, the shade of dark it injected into Will’s serious grey eyes.

“Why?” he asked quickly.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Most people would have run screaming from day one. I’m well aware of my own failings. I’m all bad dreams and raw angles, cutting through bone and brain. Sometimes I’m not myself, and sometimes I am and that’s *worse*. Why,” Will asked again, “are you still here?”

“To tell you that you are being far too unfair in your judgement?” Hannibal said with a glimmer of playfulness in his eye.

“That’s not it,” Will shook his head, “don’t be coy with me. Tell me the truth.”

“Because I find you delightful,” Hannibal said candidly, making Will’s stare seem to startle at the sincerity of his tone, “few people I have met in my life possess the vivid chroma you show, every detail exact and meaningful. You are a fierce creature, drawing blood as you bite at your bonds. I wish I could see you run free. If it was my life’s work, I would call myself satisfied to watch you exist in such a genuine freedom that I could learn every truth you hide beneath your perfect visage until I drew my last breath.”

This time the rustling silence seemed tainted by the sound of Will fidgeting next to him, the crunching of the stones under his feet interrupted every now and then by aborted sounds that tried to form the beginning of words. Eventually, he managed to articulate.

“Uh, that was...shit,” Will ducked his head once again and kicked again at the stones at his feet, sending three into the water splashing, “I don’t know what to say to that.”

“I understand, it is sometimes fearful to deal with raw emotion,” Hannibal said, nodding.

“Is there any way we can do this,” Will gestured vaguely between them, still avoiding his eyes, “properly?”

“Oh? And here I was thinking we already were,” Hannibal smiled.

“You know what I mean,” Will huffed, “officially then. You know what I mean, don’t torture it out of me. Please.”

He could tell Will’s hand was cold even through his own gloves. Hannibal gathered them both in his, cupping them and blowing onto chill skin before clasping Will’s hands and staring into darkening eyes while the world chittered and rustled and burbled past.

“I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Above/Below

Chapter Summary

> Will stared down at the murky but beautifully green water and listened to the traffic behind him, beeping and growling and buzzing. Below him small boats, long boats, commercial and tourist sailed by. Along the man-made banks trees swayed in the breeze. Will closed his eyes and rubbed at his face.
>
> “Everything’s fine,” he told himself, ignoring the lilt of hysteria in his tone, “everything’s ok.”

Chapter Notes

> If anyone watches the French tv show 'Spiral' you might recognise a character in this chapter. I love Spiral and would recommend it if you haven't seen it. I love Gilou and thought he would fit this part perfectly. Also apologies for any mistakes in the French this chapter!
> Also Will and Hannibal have some pretty intricate wardrobe choices this chapter. If you would like to see what I based it on here are the links:
> etsy.com/uk/listing/621899229/forest-earth-medusa-woodland-antler
> etsy.com/uk/listing/726420665/forest-earth-modusa-woodland-antler-ram?ref=landingpage_similar_listing_bot-1&cns=1
> amazon.co.uk/Devil-Fashion-Steampunk-Aristocrat-Regency/dp/B01GFV5MG4
> taintedprince.com/product-page/aristocratic-gold-brocade-double-breasted-mid-length-coat
> And their hotel is real too :
> www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/destinations/europe/france/paris/hotels/maison-souquet-hotel/

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I want to do something special. It’s our second anniversary.”

“I had plans to take us to the...”

“Overridden. I made my own plans.”

“But there is no time to pack.”

“Already taken care of.”

That the look he was given was both incredulous and perturbed was highly insulting. Will gave him a stern stare.

“I know how and what to pack,” Will said, letting out a pronounced ‘*ah!*’ when Hannibal advanced on the suitcases by the door, “don’t you dare. We have to leave. You’re just going to have to trust me.”

It had been a long time since Will had felt this level of panic over something that should have been under his control. Of all the trips they had taken that included long haul flights Hannibal had been the orchestrator from start to finish, and every detail had always been the finest available option. *Flying first class, stunning hotels, chauffeur driven cars, tickets to operas in box seats.* And Will had put up with all of it. Finally he had been able to organise something without any help, and without any frippery.

But now, as it had taken longer than he thought to convince his husband to just do as he was told, they were now running late and a strange sort of anxiety had sneaked up on him, one which all the planning in the world didn’t seem to cover; would Hannibal even fucking like it?

“Take the jacket,” he said stuffing it into his husband’s hands and opening the door, jerking his head towards it, “come on, please, we’re going to miss the flight.”

“As you wish,” Hannibal said, po-faced, slipping into his jacket like a graceful dancer.

Sometimes, only sometimes, Will wished his husband wasn’t so fucking elegant. It made him feel like a legless turkey in comparison.

Luckily the roads at this time of night were fairly clear. The asphalt was shinning with the earlier rainstorm, and the air was filled with the chill of moisture and imminent lightning. Will realised he was biting his thumb nail and thinking about what a shit show this would all be if their flight was cancelled, when he caught Hannibal staring at him from the passenger seat. He licked his teeth and put his hands back on the wheel, clearing his throat.

That everything went smoothly, from parking to checking their bags, only served to make him more fractious. When Will was sure something would go wrong he was the sort to stare at the sky waiting for it to fall. Hannibal’s next words made him feel justified, as much as you could cutting off your nose to spite your face.

“There seems to be a problem with our tickets.”

“Tell me you’re kidding,” Will put his hand out, grabbing them tightly “right date, right time, what..?” Hannibal put his hand behind the tickets and folded his fingers over top tap against a certain spot “that..? Christ, do you really think I had enough money to take us to France and back first class?”

Hannibal merely blinked, taking the tickets back and looking at them as if they might be some sort of joke. Will rubbed at his face and shook his head. This was off to a great start.

Simple to say, Hannibal had not enjoyed his sojourn into the realm of economy class. To be fair Will, who was always the first to deride the frippery of needless luxury, couldn't say he didn't agree. When the man in front had jerked his seat back to recline against Will's knees, he thought he might be starting to miss first class. Luckily Hannibal, who had made it very clear he would rather leap from the plane itself than sit in anything but the isle seat, had sorted Will's problem succinctly. As he sat and listened to Led Zepplin on his phone, the chair suddenly and without ceremony cranked back into upright position.

"What did you say?" Will asked suspiciously as Hannibal sat back next to him as if trying to make as little contact with his own seat as possible.

"Sometimes simply being polite is a great weapon against rudeness," Hannibal said.

"Sure," Will said, unconvinced.

"I do wish you would tell me what is bothering you," Hannibal said, suddenly.

Will frowned, "I'm fine," he said, trying to be as convincing as possible. This wasn't the place and time to bring it up, "do you want to get a drink and watch something together?"

"Anything that will make time seem faster. I am at your disposal."

This is going to be the longest seven and a half hours of my life, was all Will could think as he watched the drinks trolley meander, very slowly, towards them.

The rattling little taxi they picked up from the airport contained a grizzled, little old Parisian with verbal diarrhoea. After a seven and a half hour flight the constant noise was not appreciated. He felt like he had a hangover. Any time his brain tuned in to the chatter he really only caught every third word and, even then, had no idea what they meant. Occasionally he glanced at Hannibal to see the man with his eyes closed, window down, sometimes rubbing at the space between his eyebrows when the French litany from the driver's seat became exceptionally florid.

Will couldn't help but thank his lucky stars that the hotel looked as classy as he had pictured it.

A tall, cream slab painted with long, elegant windows and bustles of hanging baskets displaying bright red blooms like ladies lifting their skirts. The doorway, open and inviting, was flanked by two red glass lanterns. Will licked his lips and avoided the rather scrutinising look the little, old taxi driver was shooting them. When he extended the handle of his luggage and handed the other one to Hannibal he caught the man's demure glance, brows raised.

"It *used* to be a brothel."

"I said nothing," Hannibal replied.

"Didn't need to."

Walking in onto a marble floor, out of which jutted twisting columns of green and gold, wall mosaics like a Persian temple, fluted archways, red velvet, low slung, broad furniture and tasselled lamps, he wouldn't deny that it felt like walking into a bordello. A smart, black suited concierge smiled from beneath his well trimmed hair.

"Bonsoir messieurs, avez-vous une réservation?"

"Docteur Hannibal Lecter," Hannibal opened his mouth, forcing Will to snap his shut, "mon mari, William Graham."

"Bon. Veuillez signer ici, s'il vous plaît," Will watched Hannibal quickly pen his name, passing the pen to him; Will signed, ignoring as Hannibal continued to speak, telling himself to forget it. When he looked up a porter was taking his bag and the concierge was smiling primly as he handed over the keycard, "S'il te plait, fais nous le plaisir de rester."

"Most efficient service," Hannibal mentioned as they rode up in the elevator with the porter, a porcelain faced, dark haired, androgynous young woman who kept her eyes on the elevator doors.

"Uh huh," Will said, hands in his pockets.

The second floor dripped with bordeux coloured velvet. The doors filigree, inlaid with stained glass, echoing some profane cathedral. On the walls hung classical nudes, decorous women with flowers, hidden behind satin draping from alabaster shoulders. By the time they arrived at their room Will felt as if he paid the porter more than he had planned just to get her to leave.

Their room continued the theme of excess. Each door was matt black, rimmed with gold. One wall was a green-gold repeating anachronistic pattern, while the other, facing the bed, was a menagerie. Stylised peacocks, foxes, swans and jaguars hid and paraded inside a florid night time jungle, plumed with pastel foliage and bejewelled platforms. Within the wall, which lay opposite the bed, was an archway leading to a small alcove holding one plush table and couch, green velvet, set like a stage.

"Well," Hannibal began to speak as Will shut the door; he turned to find Hannibal opening the door to the bathroom to inspect, "this is interesting."

"It's a little more...intense than I was expecting," Will said, finding himself leaning back against the wall, arms folded.

"Personally," Will looked up to find Hannibal had disappeared, the sound of water splashing before he reappeared sans jacket, patting his face with a small white towel, "I find it all rather charming."

Half of him wished to just take the compliment, and the other half was up in arms at Hannibal's insinuation that his efforts were *charming*. He reminded himself to just breathe and stop taking everything so personally.

“Well aren’t you glad now that I scrimped on plane tickets so I could afford it?” Will said, smiling at Hannibal’s dismissive look, “and is charming another word for garish?” he asked with a raised brow.

“Sometimes the most brazen environments can provoke an interesting reaction,” Hannibal had moved into the small room by the bathroom which appeared to be a walk in closet and had hung up his coat; he emerged and held out his hand. Will swallowed before taking off his jacket and handing it over, smirking.

“If you’re trying to get laid you don’t have to be so obtuse about it,” Will said, enjoying Hannibal’s underplayed reaction, all but for the mischief in his eyes, “I’m going to change and then check out the lounge. Join me when you’re ready.”

Now, three hours since they had landed, Hannibal was yet to ask any questions. Will thought it might be the first time he had seen his husband let go of the reigns and hand control entirely over to him. Well, most of the control anyway, he thought. He was the master of their fates for the next two days. There was a sense of power in every move he made, enough that it almost set him ill at ease. Fierce independence had always been a constant in his life, something he refused to compromise, but in truth he wasn’t sure Hannibal was truly capable of letting go, allowing someone else to steer his course. In the three years he’d known him, Will didn’t think anyone had ever owned an action Hannibal had taken except Hannibal.

The lounge, it turned out, continued the pattern of debauched interior design. Will’s best description would have been a classical Victorian library slaked in magenta velvet. In the centre of the room was a cluster of intimate, round glass tables with two plush chairs per setting. There were two couples already occupying the room, a middle aged man and woman, blond and redhead respectively, who were sipping wine and radiating drama through her sour face and his contrite visage. The other held two young men speaking in soft French, leaning in and holding hands, seemingly lovestruck. Will took a chair at one of the two unoccupied tables and sat back, crossing his ankles and putting his hands on the cool glass surface, lacing his fingers together.

While he waited a waiter appeared and asked if he would like to order from the bar; Will took a bottle of red wine on recommendation and tried not to think about the fact that he wasn’t told how much it cost. This had never been about money, but that didn’t stop the knee jerk reaction. He was half way through his first glass by the time Hannibal arrived. Will was well aware that it made him bristle when he noticed the room’s occupants throw interested glances at the man as he walked into the room, but in truth he couldn’t blame the reaction.

“So,” Will said as Hannibal sat, smoothing his rich chocolate bow tie and straightening the chocolate, black, white and light brown striped suit jacket before reaching for the bottle on the table and inspecting it, lip twitching in approval before pouring himself a glass, finishing with an expert twist of the hand, “it fits.”

“It does,” Hannibal nodded, leaning back and crossing his legs, letting the wine swirl, “perfectly.”

“You like it?”

“I wonder how long it will be before you understand, my darling,” Hannibal took a sip, eyes closing slightly as he savoured the red liquid on his tongue, “there is very little you do that I don’t appreciate. Though may I ask when did you have it made?”

“Last month,” Will said, shrugging, “Grant already had your measurements, I just chose the materials. He said this cut is very fashionable just now.”

“I will have to have another made when we return.”

Relaxing a little, Will took a drink of wine. His husband was very particular about his wardrobe, and only doubled up on outfits he particularly coveted. On looking up from the table Will found himself scrutinised. He frowned.

“So,” Hannibal put his glass down, “have you had time to think about telling me what is bothering you?"

"Christ," Will murmured, "it's like living on a hot rock with a rattlesnake. Will you give it a rest?"

Hannibal tipped his head, but his eyes were clear and direct. Will ignored him.

"Well," Hannibal eventually said, sniffing, "this has been a long game? Am I to suppose I will be at your mercy for the foreseeable future?”

“You are,” Will said, licking his lips of the purple stain, “can I trust you not to peek?”

“If I do, you may punish me.”

Will almost choked on his wine, sending an unrepentant glare across the table.

“Can’t help yourself, can you,” Will said, “come on, we need to get dinner. I’ve got somewhere booked.”

For their restaurant, it turned out, they both arrived hideously overdressed. While he had worked homicide, back in New York, his co-workers had used him as a target for practical jokes, mainly because he knew they resented his quick rise through the ranks. Will had always risen above it, mainly because the only other option he could think of involved bodily harm. Now, this was the first time he thought he might have played a practical joke on himself.

“I swear,” Will said feeling a bizarrely familiar pit in his stomach as they stood outside and stared at the tiny, plastic chaired cafe, “they let me book a table.”

“I see,” Hannibal said, voice giving nothing away for free.

“What kind of cafe lets people book tables,” Will flustered, scratching at his neck, “sorry. Do you want to go back to the hotel?”

“One thing you may not know about me, my dear,” Hannibal said taking what seemed like a steeling breath before walking forwards and holding the door open for him, “is that I have never missed a reservation. I do not intend this to break a lifetime habit.”

“You’re sure..?” Will felt the onset nerves worsen; *he’s not even going to let me fix this, is he*.

“More than,” Hannibal said, but Will could tell he was put out, from the way his lips pressed together.

“Ok, uh, sure, ok,” Will swallowed and walked inside, realising he hadn’t played the joke on himself so much as, inadvertently, on them both.

“All is forgiven?” Will asked, smiling softly and looking up at Hannibal through his lashes.

“Almost all,” Hannibal tipped his head to the right and thanked their waitress as she brought another bottle of sake to the table.

“Alright, alright,” Will sat up from his lean on the table with his face cupped in one hand, “I get it. I’ll pay for this later, huh?”

Hannibal said nothing, merely pouring for both of them.

Somehow, with what little luck Will believed he might possess in this world, dinner had been wonderful. The tiny, plastic cafe, adorned with overly cute anime style characters pointing to items on their plastic menu and tinny music piped through on a radio from the counter had welcomed them like they were the first customers they’d ever taken. For all Will knew they were. A young Japanese woman with her jet black hair tied messily back into a ponytail and a deferential stare that only a Beta could pull off successfully had taken them to their table with a plastic tablecloth and a little folded piece of paper atop it which had been hastily scribbled on. Will assumed, insanely, it meant ‘*reserved*’. When Hannibal had thanked her and then asked if they might see the menu in flawless Japanese the girl’s eyes, which had been downcast (Will presumed so as not to look at their ridiculously out of place outfits and burst out laughing) blinked up to Hannibal’s face and smiled broadly, letting out little noises of appreciation and replying happily.

Things had been good from then on out. Turned out to be a family run cafe that had been there for a couple of years, mother and grandmother in the back cooking, daughter out front serving. None of them spoke a huge amount of English, even less French, and once Hannibal had spoken their native tongue flawlessly and begun asking if they could cook traditional Japanese dishes he knew the recipes for by memory they set about treating Hannibal as the son they never had. Dish after dish of food Will was pretty sure wasn’t on the menu at all began ferrying out in wicker bowls, or black lacquer plates that didn’t fit the décor: marinated fried tofu with pickle, crisped mackerel skin shavings over salmon roe sushi, tan-men with a wonderfully light but flavoursome broth, sautéed yams, salmon and mushrooms. Even the mother and grandmother emerged, all showing their genetic similarity but only in diminishing, wrinklier packages. By the end of the meal Hannibal had all three women fawning over him as he responded politely and sincerely, pulling giggles and laughs out of all of them, the grandmother waving him away as she blushed. Will had just watched it all with a

smile, content to be a side line to the action, just glad this all hadn't gone up in flames. Not another diner had appeared their entire stay, enough that Will either felt bad that this delicious little cafe was being ignored by the local clientele or guilty that they had booked the whole place out just for them.

"So, you enjoy being fussed over by matronly Japanese women," Will ignored the look he was given; his tongue was loose with alcohol and tiredness, "haven't really learned anything new there, have I."

"Drink your saké, darling, it will get cold," Hannibal said aloofly.

It was dark by the time they walked back, the air soft and warm, the street lined with people dining and singing. The area held the charm of a village but the vibrancy of a metropolis. Will felt particularly tired but wired. Jet lag, he told himself. He hoped that they would both be vaguely in shape for tomorrow considering what he had planned. When Will had tripped over his own feet, laughing at himself, Hannibal had linked their arms to keep him steady.

"Don't you ever get tired?" Will asked, unable to hide the mote of bitterness in his tone.

"Surgeons rarely do," Hannibal said, "I have extensive expertise in the arena of sleep depravation."

"What's the longest you've gone?" Will asked, curious.

Hannibal seemed to ponder, while Will admired his profile against the vibrant Paris street, "sixty six with four hours sleep, I believe. Though I am hardly keeping track."

"Jesus," Will shook his head and continued their slow trek back to the hotel, looking down at their feet walking in synchronicity; for someone who loved to sleep as much as Hannibal did Will was amazed to hear the bizarre figure, "doesn't sound legal. Or safe."

"Legality doesn't always come into play when people's lives are at stake."

"Suppose not," in another couple of minutes they had cleared the busy main thoroughfare, heading down a cobbled street with a small church at the end, plumes of clematis crawling over the wall to their right, making the air heady; Will frowned for a moment and then decided, suddenly, to press on with reckless abandon. Later he would blame it on the jet-lag and the saké and talk of matronly Japanese women. Truthfully he knew that Hannibal already knew that something was wrong, and keeping it silent any longer would only make it worse, "your uncle came to the house a couple of weeks ago."

A small hitch in their perfectly timed steps, enough to make Will stumble. Hannibal kept him steady.

"Will I need to carry you back to our room?" Hannibal said with an underlying snip in his tone.

"I'm not drunk," Will bit back, frowning, "so there is a problem then," rolling his eyes when Hannibal looked away and sniffed.

“What did he want?” Hannibal asked, sounding unperturbed, “He came while I was at work?”

“Yeah,” Will answered.

“To see you.”

“Mm hmm.”

“My darling, love of my life, I do wish you would get to the *point*,” Hannibal said.

“All the time I’ve known you, all of the things we’ve ever shared, this strange cloud hangs over your family visits. I think I might have seen your uncle for a grand total of ten minutes in the flesh, always in passing. And a few weeks ago, he shows up, at our house, and offers me a god damned bona fide, mobster style suitcase full of money and tells me he’ll give it to me if I begin divorce proceedings.”

This time Will knew it wasn’t his fault that he stumbled. Hannibal had stopped stock still, forcing Will to grab onto him or risk ending up flat out on the street. He let out a puff of breath and sighed, trying to shaking off the anger that was leaching through him, through their bond. They stood in silence for what felt like an age, but was surely less than a minute.

“You are bringing this up to me now,” Hannibal stated coldly.

“When should I have brought it up?” Will shrugged, unlinking from Hannibal’s arm and scratching at his face, “Christ I fear for the safety of complete strangers who are rude to you in the street,” Hannibal’s eyes jumped to him, the maroon deep and calculating, “never mind your own flesh and blood trying to instigate a family war. I mean who the fuck carries around suitcases of money Hannibal?” Will asked tightly, “You told me he worked in the finance sector, is that a metaphor or what? Hell, he scared the crap out of me, I didn’t know who he was at first because you really look nothing fucking alike. I know that your aunt hates my guts but now your uncle apparently thinks he can bribe me out of matrimony. Didn’t realise I was such a pariah.”

More silence, this time tinged with a sense of fear Will wasn’t used to feeling, not around Hannibal. For a moment his addled brain couldn’t tell why Hannibal would be feeling scared, only to realise that it wasn’t Hannibal’s feelings he had picked up on. Will lifted his arms, hugging them around himself and rubbing as if to stave off a chill he wasn’t sure really existed.

“Did you take it?” Hannibal asked, deadpan.

“Did I *take* it?” Will replied, unable to stem the anger, “Did I fucking *take* it, are you serious? If I had taken the money in that fucking suitcase believe me, Hannibal, we wouldn’t have been flying economy to Paris to eat in plastic cafes.”

“It is worth that much to him?” Hannibal shook his head, face twisted to a wry stare, “Why have you told me this?”

“I didn’t think it mattered. There’s no love lost between me and your rich relatives. This was just a particularly showy display.”

“Do not lie to me.”

Five words that sent a shiver from the nape of his neck to the small of his spine. Will swallowed and levelled his eyes at Hannibal; his gaze was met and returned. Refusing to be intimidated, Will carried on.

“I wasn’t going to,” he shrugged softly, “I...wasn’t going to but...” he turned around, throwing his arms up; the church was gloomy before him, spire blacking out the few stars that had managed to pierce the haze of big city pollution, “I don’t know. I guess I need to confirm it, it’s something that’s been there, all along, and I don’t know if understanding will drive me mad or...”

“What?” Hannibal asked succinctly; Will knew he was close to a truth from the man. Hannibal was only brief and to the point when he had given up all pretence.

All pretence. Will licked his lips and felt his pulse stutter. All this time, and they had never been this close to it all spilling out like guts over a hunter’s knife. That simple question, *‘What?’* could lead to so many others, but there was only one that mattered. The one thing that he could ask and might be told the truth, right here and now on this street in a foreign land surrounded by strangers. What the hell are you doing, what the *hell are you doing?* Will asked himself. He hated that his lack of reservation had forced his mouth to bring him close to the brink, the precipice that he refused to look over the edge of, the one that threatened to swallow him whole any time he considered it. With fear and elation racing in his system, the years of love and just being hanging between them like a Damoclean thread, Will bolted at the last second.

“You had an affair with her, right? Your aunt?” he asked, turning back to look at the stoic figure of his husband, “That’s why your uncle hates you so much.”

“When did you come to this conclusion?” Hannibal asked.

“Ages ago,” Will said.

“That is what I thought,” Will was sure Hannibal would have sounded barely different to anyone else, but to him he sounded like a sharp knife decidedly close to unwilling flesh, “Then why don’t you ask me what you truly want to ask,” Hannibal said, approaching with a steady tap of new shoes on cobble, “dear Will.”

A sudden and overwhelming need to back up, sent straight from his nervous system to his muscles, overriding his feelings. Will took two steps in retreat and Hannibal stopped dead. They stared at each other, Will with startled hesitation, Hannibal with blank and polished steel.

“Take me back to the hotel,” Will said without compromise, “I want you to take me back to the hotel now.”

“Of course,” Hannibal replied, “darling.”

They walked separately, only coming into contact when Will stumbled over the stairs when it turned out the elevator had broken down in their absence, Hannibal taking hold of his elbow to steady him. They undressed unceremoniously, Will folding his clothes and placing them on the small couch in the alcove, while Hannibal took time to hang up each part of his suit immaculately in the closet. When Hannibal slid into bed he switched off his bedside lamp and turned onto his side. Will stared at the back of Hannibal’s head, the immaculate hair, and wondered if he could ever allow them to be whole.

Or if the glass menagerie they existed within would shatter and cut them both to ribbons.

Breakfast was quiet. Will had awoken first, as was usual. Fogged and aching a shower beckoned, trying to let the shushing and hushing water drown out the raging thoughts in his head. It had marginally worked, but not enough that he hadn’t scrubbed his skin pink before drying and dressing. He left Hannibal to sleep, but not before leaning down to brush the hair back that had fallen into his sleeping eyes and leave a kiss upon his crown.

Breakfast was a small buffet in a narrow room decked in dust-green velvet patterned with stylised peacock feathers, ending in tall, bright windows. He was the only one to attend, ordering a double espresso that, when he sipped it, nearly took his face off. It was good though, did what he needed it to, woke him the fuck up. Will took a plate and swithered for a while at the buffet, somehow coming back with nothing but a slice of ham from all the wonderful pastries and fruits on display. Picking at it for a while Will felt that it was to indicative of his turmoil, and, after asking for a map from reception, left the hotel into the pale sunshine.

It was a forty minute walk to the river. Most people he passed were dressed for work, heads down on their phones or stopped at boulangeries for a quick breakfast. He passed the Montmartre cemetery, like a village of crypts dozing in the sunshine, the Eglise de la Sainte Trinité towering pale and gothic like a fortress against the blue sky, the Palais Garnier adorned with golden angels holding their wings aloft, the L’église de la Madaleine with its contrasting strict Grecian temple aesthetic, down through the wide roads and rather grubby feel of the Place de la Concorde and onto the bridge.

Will stared down at the murky but beautifully green water and listened to the traffic behind him, beeping and growling and buzzing. Below him small boats, long boats, commercial and tourist sailed by. Along the man-made banks trees swayed in the breeze. Will closed his eyes and rubbed at his face.

“Everything’s fine,” he told himself, ignoring the lilt of hysteria in his tone, “everything’s ok.”

The walk back seemed shorter. He wasn’t as interested in his surroundings, the beautiful architecture, the sleepy feel, the people. His focus had introverted. Will hoped it didn’t spoil everything.

On his return Will automatically started for the stairs up to the rooms, when a movement from the dinning room caught his eye. A slight hesitation, his hand gripping the door frame with flashes of last night's alcohol fuelled lunacy haunting him, before he entered.

“You’re up,” he stated as he sat down across the table from his husband.

“And you have been for a walk,” Hannibal answered as if to highlight how mundane and pointless their interaction was.

“Yeah, I went to look at the river.”

“You are too brisk for my morning sensibilities, darling,” Hannibal said as he sipped a coffee so black it rivalled tar and spread jam onto an open croissant.

And with that the night before became null and void. Will knew from experience that if Hannibal did not bring it up right away then he never would, and if Will tried to then the topic would be shot down faster than a clay pigeon. Will looked at the table, tapping his fingers against the cloth and sniffed.

“Oh, I meant to say yesterday,” he decided not to press the issue just yet, going with something lighter instead, “that if there is anyone here you want to visit, any friends or...anything, just say.”

“Our anniversary, and you wish to invite others?” Hannibal asked, eyes twinkling with suppressed humour.

“I brought you here unannounced,” Will shrugged, “thought I’d better check. Shame to come all this way if there was someone you would miss.”

They sat in silence as Hannibal finished his coffee and pastry, wiped his fingers and his mouth, and checked himself for crumbs. On standing together Will hesitated once more, blinking and wishing he could have more faith in himself. After all this time, it seemed unfeasible that he could put up with the idea of Hannibal’s mysteries. Or the idea of his own lies. When he looked up the man himself was watching him. Without warning hands shot out to grab, pulling his shocked body forwards as Will opened his mouth to protest, only to have it silenced with a harsh, heavy kiss. His lips split apart with a heady moan to allow a tongue access, fingers grasping at expensive fabric, legs tired from walking now having difficulty holding him up. When they split apart Will could hear his breath was ragged; Hannibal leaned in to press those wonderful lips to his ear.

“You are the one that I miss,” he was told, “you are the one that I crave. You are the one that undoes me, darling. I need no other. I wish there was a way to make you see.”

The truth. Will knew the truth, and the truth knew him. His life had been a solid litany of truths since the day his mother left he and his father to cope alone and Will had realised he couldn’t lie to himself, and neither could anyone else. He always *knew*. This would be the first time he had allowed one truth to be subverted by another, just as real, just as full and wonderful as the other was elatedly terrifying. Hannibal Lecter loved him, and Hannibal Lecter was...

“Bedroom,” Will leaned back, grabbing a smiling Hannibal by his tie and giving it a pull, eyes dark, “*now.*”

Hannibal Lecter wasn’t sure. There were times that he thought he might have been happier: *split moments of joy, listening to his mother play while his sister danced, the first time he attended the Grand Opera house with his aunt to listen to Monteverdi, opening Grutas’ carotid artery with a precision nick and listening to the man’s pain for forty minutes as he slowly bled to death, the first write up from Freddie Lounds of a Ripper murder that let him know his masterpieces had caught the eyes of the FBI.* All wonderful moments, but not constants. They were spikes in a line, peaks in a graph.

Will Graham, in contrast, was an almost perpetual high.

They stood together in the Musée d’Orsay before a rugged sculpture of a man, leaning back on one leg, the other stabbing out against an angular rock, a massive, stylised bow held in his left hand, the other held back as if to pull at an imaginary bow string.

“You don’t like it?” Will was asking him, frowning as if he thought Hannibal had only been pretending to be cultured since they met.

“Bourdelle is dull and industrial,” Hannibal sniffed, “I prefer the Carpeuax.”

“That stuff over there?” Will asked with a raised brow, “The fire and brimstone, oversold pretty boys?”

“If you are trying to get a rise out of me you’ll have to try harder,” Hannibal said, keeping his eyes on the statue of *Hercules and the Archer*.

Without missing a beat Hannibal saw Will, bottom lip between his teeth, reach over without looking, put his hand up under the tail of Hannibal’s suit jacket and pinch his ass. Hannibal gave an involuntary start, looking to his husband as the man stared back. Will gave in first, crumbling into a laugh that he tempered into a hoarse chuckle when he started getting looks from the other patrons.

“Never a dull moment,” Hannibal shook his head.

“I’m going to look at the Rodin over there,” Will said, utterly ignoring him despite the smile on his face, “I’m sure I’ll find you next to some statue of a beautiful youth.”

“They are my favourite subjects,” Hannibal said pointedly.

“Flatterery, huh? Nice try.”

“I refuse to stare at controlled chaos,” Hannibal let out a withering sigh.

“I like controlled chaos,” Will shrugged.

“I am well aware.”

He watched as Will turned and left, hands in his pockets, making for a set of organised palates which elevated a series of dramatic white sculptures, all seeming in the midst of still being discovered within the stone. They had a rugged, unfinished look to them. Hannibal could understand why Will was fascinated. He returned his eyes to the burnished beast before him and listened to the sound of feet stepping up next to his own.

“Please pass on my commiserations to the commandetore,”Hannibal said blithely, “I am truly amazed it has taken someone this long to appear. Pazzi must be slipping.”

“Slow and steady,” came a man’s voice, arrogant and tired, “always wins in the end.”

It would be fair to say that time had not been kind to Rinaldo Pazzi. Memories of his stern, desperate look, his young face unable to hide his revulsion as they sat across from each other at a small metal table in a grey room with a two way mirror in the Questure di Firenze. Endless questioning, endless suffering. Such beautiful desolation and terrible anger as the man had been forced to watch him walk. The last Hannibal had seen him was Venice the year before, he and Will’s last foray to Italy. Now, it seemed, Pazzi didn’t have the clout to take a jaunt across the border.
In his place was a stout Frenchman, broad, face a little piggy with dark hair, casual clothing with a light jacket and an obvious gun at his hip.

“I’m amazed his superiors ever funded his little trips. Do yours?”

“I’m here as a precaution. You cause no trouble, I won’t have to muss up my knuckles on your face.”

“Ah, then there is no official casework. How quaint. I do hope I’m not taking up any of your valuable time. No gruesome crimes going unsolved in your absence Lieutenant Escoffier.”

That got his attention, his stare hard and quick; easy to violence this one, quick to bully. He would be a fight, he would struggle right until the last gasp. Hannibal wished, for a moment, that he was alone.

“I see you have a little one in your talons,” Escoffier continued as if Hannibal had never spoken; Hannibal couldn’t help his eyes flicking to Will, still staring at the sculptures.

“That seems an awfully personal assumption. Am I to presume that as this is unofficial and you seem so very invested, this is a personal favour to Pazzi?”

“Putan,” Escoffier spat out, digging in his pockets for a cigarette and shrugging with a pout, “the less time I stand around here with you the more time I can enjoy my life.”

“Am I to be expecting your company for the rest of my stay?” Hannibal asked.

“Lets just say,” Escoffier was smiling around the cigarette he’d stuck into the corner of his mouth, “that I wouldn’t give you the chance to repent that others might.”

“You should be a priest, not a policeman.”

“You think I bring people together?” Escoffier was laughing now, a little hoarse, and lighting his cigarette.

He should have been paying more attention, but Hannibal had allowed himself to become carried away in the particulars of biting chatter. He turned to find Will standing behind them, hands still in his pockets.

“Thought you didn’t have any friends to bump into?” Will asked, poking Hannibal in the ribs; a moment of silence, “aren’t you going to introduce me? Or is there no need?”

“This is Giles Escoffier,” Hannibal lifted his hand to the man before gesturing to Will, “this is my husband, William Graham.”

“Gilou,” the man took Will’s hand and shook it gruffly, puffing contentedly.

“Will,” his husband said, frowning, “I had plans to get lunch soon. Do we need a table fore three or what?”

“Now that would be a sight to see,” Escoffier coughed, “I suppose I’d better be going. Be seeing you, Doctor Lecter.”

The man left just as a museum attendant approached him, clearly gesturing to the no smoking sign; they watched as he waved her away and continued to the exit, enjoying his cigarette until he was out of sight behind one of the wall like sculptures near the entrance. The silence was permeated with loud footsteps echoing across the museum floor, murmurs of couples and patrons commenting on the creations housed within.

“What the hell was that all about?” Will asked eventually.

“An old friend,” Hannibal said offhandedly.

“Friend? He didn’t even use your first name,” he said critically.

“Oh no, he works for an old friend of mine,” Hannibal said.

“Why can’t you ever just be straight with me?” Will asked wryly.

“Because I do not need to be.”

That they were once more circling an untested truth didn’t seem to make Will any less taught about the subject.

“Come on, let’s go. I’ve got a schedule to keep.”

The day passed gently, despite the thorns Hannibal continued to interject into conversations through lunch, as they walked by monuments, as they ate dinner at the hotel. Though Will was capable of keeping up with him with little effort, turning Hannibal’s quips back on their heads and spinning them, stripping them, leaving Hannibal wanting for more.

“You enjoyed your steak then?” Will asked as they waited for Hannibal’s coffee.

“Not as much as I enjoyed the gateaux.”

“You and your sweet tooth.”

Hannibal watched him closely, thanking the waiter. The coffee was average. He considered not finishing it but took it as medicine for the caffeine instead.

“You seem a little antsy, darling.”

“Oh? I’m fine.”

“As you say.”

Yet Will was unable to fully hide his tell. The hand he kept on the white tablecloth tapped its forefinger against the surface, over and over, a rhythm one, two, one two three, one two, one two three. Once they excused themselves from the dining room Will seemed to relax slightly. It crossed his mind to purposefully dawdle just to create further stress, but seeing the divot between Will’s brows unwind was rather pleasant.

The room was the same as they left it, other than that the sheets had been changed. He was glad for that, considering their earlier activities he was looking forward to clean sheets. He headed for the bathroom to clean his teeth, but out the corner of his eye he caught sight of two large boxes sitting in the closet that previously had been absent.

“We’ll need to get changed now,” Will was saying as he took off his shoes, “if we’re going to be there in time.”

“Are you looking to continue this pantomime?” Hannibal asked, brow raised.

“As long as you’re looking to play,” Will said, catching his eye; the look sent the hairs at the nape of his neck on end. Hannibal loved it.

The closet was just large enough for one person to change, two to stand. Hannibal lifted the lid of the box delicately, enjoying the easy shift of card against card, revealing bustles of crepe. Nestled inside, peering out like a curious child, was a masquerade dressed in leaves and sharp points. Blushed in bronze and black lay a wonderful face mask, like a carven statue. Metal-like-moss, embedded with leaves and twigs, were patterned across the skull creating a burnished forest floor. Growing from the brows sat two twisting, devilish horns, ribbed and tips twisted downwards to create a comely grotesqueness. It was marginally heavy; running fingers over the back he could tease out the feel of resin, slick but gripping very slightly to the skin.

It seemed to stare at him, as if it could see him, as if it were some ancient creature discovered beneath a tree stump that had stared into his soul and reflected all that stood before it.

It was wondrous.

“Like it?” Will asked from the doorway as he looked down at his own mask in his hands, messing with the strap.

“I do,” Hannibal looked up at the mirror hanging above chest of drawers and lifted the mask into place; it was impossible to stop the thrill as the world cramped down into a succour of darkness, leaving him peering out to see his face transformed.

“It suits you,” Will said as he appeared in the mirror, mask in place.

The second mask which Will had adorned was of similar craftsmanship, only this mask bore antlers twisted with leafy boughs, moss caressing the sides of his face and twigs festooned with sweet, black berries. They stood side by side, a pagan monument to corruption and depravity.

“Perfection,” Hannibal said with such delicacy the word almost didn’t exist at all.

“Hmm?” Will asked.

“Nothing.”

“Put on the rest. We’re leaving in ten minutes.”

Hannibal did as he was told. As he unfolded a black and gold brocade coat from his box of gifts, Hannibal hoped that Lt. Escoffier was following them tonight. He was sure the photographs of them for his file would be spectacular.

They sailed on a boat small enough to sway as they were pushed, sloshing over the black water. At the back sat a man in a white mask with a raised hand holding a lit torch, flickering against the walls as they descended into the tunnels. Will sat in front of him, dripping in red, the black brocade on his coat like twisting vines. His own attire was complemented by the firelight, black with a gilt Florentine pattern that picked up on notes of orange and yellow.

“I feel like Orpheus on the River Styx,” he murmured, looking to his left as they passed a string quartet flanked by golden candelabras playing on the water’s edge, “only the underworld is too familiar.”

“Trying to tell me about a near death experience?” Will said, his smirk clear on the side of his face that Hannibal could see; Hannibal reached out to smooth his fingers across Will’s clean shaven cheek, feeling the pressure as he leaned into the touch.

“We all dream of death, at some point or another.”

“Some more than others,” Will said softly, looking to his right as they passed a group of revellers, bedecked in full regalia, feathers and masks, dresses with panniers wide enough to cause issues with doors in pearl and black, gold and red.

Hannibal sat back and soaked in the surrealism of the journey, feeling as if he were being escorted into the past with a smile and a how do you do. The boat stopped at a small pier where a man with a harlequin costume helped them from their transport.

“Your names, messers?” he asked; even through the man’s face mask he could see avaricious eyes laid upon his mate.

“Dr Hannibal Lecter,” he said without preamble, “and my husband Will Graham.”

“Ah yes,” the man said with an overly jovial tone, bowing with his leg extending behind him, “please make your way to the main chamber. I do believe the fun is about to begin.”

Taking Will’s arm Hannibal led him to the door. The clear disapproval in Will’s stance was only confirmed when the man pulled his arm back, the grey of his eyes hooded behind his mask, “I swear if I have to hear you introduce me like that one more time on this trip Hannibal I’m going to change my name altogether.”

“Can you fault me for being covetous of such beauty?” Hannibal asked without repent, brushing Will’s lips with his thumb, enjoying the dark stare he received, “After you, darling.”

The main chamber turned out to be larger than expected. Within were a cluster of twenty or so people dressed similarly in varying degrees of masquerade, every colour and shade of shimmer and sparkle. The domed roof created a slight echo to their voices, like a choir. Off to the right Hannibal was delighted to see a harpsichord and seating for further musicians. Towards the back of the room a man, an alpha that Hannibal could scent from where he stood, beckoned for their attention.

“Madame et Monsieur, bonsoir. Merci d’ȇtre venu ici.”

“He is thanking us for coming,” Hannibal leaned in to Will, translating as he spoke, “and wishes us to partake of every pleasure and debauchery that would have been afforded to the aristocracy in the days of the Venetian elite.”

“So we’re all going to sleep with our cousins, get syphilis and die young?” Will murmured in reply.

“Can you bear to indulge me for one evening, darling?”

“Sorry,” Will said, clearing his throat though his smile remained, “I’ll be good.”

“He is introducing the musicians,” Hannibal said, turning around as the quartet from the waterway were led inside and set up; a beautiful omega with long, red hair held back in a black satin bow sat at the harpsichord and set her fingers on the keys.

Hannibal, for the moment he could savour it, closed his eyes and let his imagination run wild. After the first piece, Bach concerto no.5 in f minor, they were asked to make groups of four and were taught a dance to perform. True to form he could not perform anything less than flawless, but would not lie and say he was fully focused. His husband was ravishing this evening, the most he had ever seen him. The finery suited Will, regardless that the man hated anything seen as upper class. The coat was narrow at the waist, his trousers slim fitting and distracting. He was distracting. Hannibal allowed himself to admit that Will had always been a distraction. As their group touched fingers and walked in a circle Hannibal thought of his Aunt; she had been the one to teach him the formal dances she deemed necessary for him to

learn. To become a proper suitor, heir to the Lecter name. How little she thought of Will, Hannibal mused, keeping his eyes on the man in question, and how little she understood. Such narrow jealousy.

His poor uncle, enveloped deep within his love for her and his malaise of a life. Was it a sense of conscience that caused the need for the bribe, or maybe a chance to ruin his nephew's happiness as much as Hannibal had ruined his?

They congratulated themselves with a round of applause as the dance came to an end.

"We are to follow him," Hannibal translated as Will moved to his side; he took two glasses of champagne from a waiter and handed one to his husband, "shall we?"

"You're enjoying yourself, aren't you," Will was smiling.

"That you doubted yourself, my dear, is unfathomable. You know me like no other."

"I sure do," Will said, looking down at the ground, "better keep up I guess, don't want to get lost down here."

Next came a series of winding passages, with a period accurate depiction of the depravity and horror of the age in which they found themselves. A slave market where desperate men were shackled and bound and renamed as price-tags by a disgusting pig of a character with greasy skin and a rotten laugh. Next a narrow hall of brick lined with brothel girls. The smell of their natural perfume was overwhelming as they filtered through, omegas every last one in their red stockings and cooing words. Hannibal noticed that as much as they stroked at his face, his clothing, whispered the fantasies they could provide into his ear, Will was not touched. Not by a single one. An itch had him wanting to inquire as to why, but he thought another time might be more appropriate. Then a room where sets of street actors played out the lives of Casanova, Machiavelli, the Borgias. At each their crowd gasped and squealed and cried out, whispering and holding to each other, covering their mouths at the overplayed sense of dissoluteness. He found that he and Will were the quietest of the group, though Will stayed close to his side at all times.

It was not until the final room that Hannibal truly perked. The others had been amusing, raucous, designed to shock and awe. He found it took something special to do so for him these days. And now, here at the final gasp, it presented itself.

The room was white tile, narrow, with a barred window high above. Hannibal thought he could smell food and wondered if he could trace their steps, figure out their position above ground. Then the actor appeared, an anachronistic physician in a white, loose fitting smock. Wheeled in before their eyes was a well acted, terrified patient, sweating and shivering and complaining in common French of a malady of the stomach. The physician, whose long wig made him seem more a fool than he was even portrayed, grinned and pulled out tool after tool from his bag with which to torture the man on the gurney, fake blood spattering from each 'wound' as the man jerked and squealed.

"Ah! But we must operate!" the actor said suddenly, turning with a dramatic flourish to the audience, "Do we have the honour of being in the presence of a surgeon from the Royal

College?”

All eyes began glancing between each other, from mask to mask. Hannibal looked to Will for any trace of complicity. His mate simply tilted his head in a nod towards the stage. Taking Will’s hand in his, the skin was warm, hot to the touch against his lips. He took a breath, savouring the moment, before stepping forwards, parting the way with arms stretched wide.

“A guinea pig, my lord,” the actor cast his voice and flourished his arm to the tense man prostate at their side, “for the good of science, you understand,” he winked at the crowd who were clapping and laughing at the inclusion of one of their own.

“Rightly so,” Hannibal put his hands behind his back and, for the moment, revelled in the absurdity and freedom of the act, “one would never disfigure but for in the name of science.”

“Oh ho ho,” the actor laughed, “of course! Now this one complains of stomach pains...”

Hannibal was handed silver forceps with which to act at removing a piece of metal from the man’s abdomen who screamed and jerked around appropriately for the action. Next an amputation saw applied to a fake leg which came away with a shriek making his audience exclaim with shock, then an ecraseur which, when explained, made some of the men pale even behind their masks, a gorget for removing stones from the bladder, a trepan and trephine. As each was handed to him Hannibal took great joy in explaining each device in detail to his rapt congregation before acting out the use on their willing guinea pig. By the end of the set piece he was treated to a bow from both actors and a rousing round of applause from his fellow party guests. He gave a courtier’s bow, watching as they were herded through to the next area like frantic and happy little sheep. Will was the last one left standing in the room, waiting for him.

“How was I?” Hannibal asked, checking his clothing for any stray sprays of fake blood.

“A consummate showman,” Will said, adjusting his mask to sit more comfortably when Hannibal stepped up to stand before him.

“Your idea, my darling?”

“I might have had a hand in it. We’re falling behind again,” Will gestured to the exit.

He offered his arm and Will took it. Somewhere, deep beneath his heart where no one could touch, a warmth of thoughts for the future blossomed like an evening honeysuckle, sweet and potent.

The party moved to a more modern building where they were treated to a solo performance by a wonderful young opera singer, her voice powerful but clean, soaring. Hannibal found his eyes drawn to her mouth, perfectly shaping the notes and controlling the cadence. Once her set was complete Hannibal excused himself from Will and approached her.

“Couper le souffle,” Hannibal remarked.

“Ah, merci beaucoup,” she said with a hint of shyness, “vous êtes trop gentille avec moi.”

She seemed relieved and pleased to have met someone with which she could discuss her craft. Hannibal was not entirely aware of becoming too carried away with their conversation.

“Merci beaucoup, c'était très sympa de discuter avec vous,” she said, looking a little concerned, “mais votre partenaire...”

It had been many a year since Hannibal had felt what he might describe as a jolt of fury to the extent that the sight he was privy to instilled in him. Will was standing, one arm folded around his middle while he held his glass to his mouth with the other, and tried his best to ignore the man behind him. Hannibal recognised the man as their compère, skulking behind his husband as if he were the man’s shadow; when the offending shadow leaned in purposefully smelled his mate Hannibal felt the stem of the glass in his hand snap, just as Will turned, said something Hannibal didn’t catch over the roaring of his ears. He felt his feet carry him forwards without thought as Will threw his drink in the man’s face before grabbing him by the throat; stepping in seemed wise, despite wishing to see where his darling was planning to take it. The other party goers, who had been steadfastly ignoring the disgusting behaviour, now turned to watch, shocked.

“You come near me again and you’ll find out what I’m capable of, you piece of...” Will was saying as the man choked.

“I think it best that we not get violent,” Hannibal interjected; Will glanced at him before looking back at the man caught in his grasp, “there appears to have been a misunderstanding.”

“A misunderstanding requires a brain,” Will seethed.

“Shall we retire, darling?” Hannibal asked, setting his hand on Will’s shoulder.

“...I’d like that,” Will agreed after a pause, letting go of the man’s jugular, leaving him to let out a curse, spit on the floor at Will’s feet and storm off.

“If you would speak to the coordinator,” Hannibal asked Will softly, knowing that the last thing Will would want in this state was to be coddled, “they will organise transport for us.”

“Sure,” Will couldn’t quite shake the dark lilt from his tone.

As he watched his husband stalk away, Hannibal could imagine the clop of hooves, the bray of a stag in the forest; proud and dangerous. We are cut of the same cloth, Hannibal told himself as he turned to trace the footsteps of their errant compère, but finished by a different artist.

Hannibal found him in the previous room, still sprayed with fake blood, taking a drink from a plastic water bottle, muttering to himself. Looking up he saw Hannibal and froze.

“I must apologise,” Hannibal said, “for my husband’s behaviour.”

“Yeah,” the man seemed wary but willing to compromise as he wiped down his costume and grimaced at the smell of champagne, “I thought you yanks had better control over your better halves.”

“Some more than others,” Hannibal nodded, approaching slowly, “sometimes it is difficult to keep them trained, if you understand.”

“Right, right,” the man removed his mask, ruffling his hair; he was middle aged, slightly balding on top where his blond hair had thinned, mediocre face slightly sweaty; he caught his stare, “although I’ve heard other things too.”

“Oh?”

“You lot aren’t picky, right? Have a friend that gets a lot of traffic through his tours. Heard talk about a male omega came through from the states, pretty...promiscuous.”

“Is that so?” Hannibal asked, tipping his head.

“So, your little whore?” the man grinned, “You willing to, you know, share him around? Cause he’s driving me crazy here with that smell.”

Close enough to be able to move with a languid grace belied by deadly accuracy. The man only had a second to try and move before Hannibal had gathered the neck of his cloak in one hand and pulled him off balance, the other reaching down with well manicured nails to take hold of the man’s genitals through his black trousers and pinch. Since meeting Will Hannibal had become fascinated by how much fear and pain could be caused by the smallest pressure; something he would one day have to thank his *better half* for teaching him.

“If you ever mention my husband by name or by profanity again, if you even look at him, in his general direction, I will hunt you down and remove every last one of the bones from your feet, *au coup par coup*,” the man was panting, squealing every time Hannibal twisted his fingers, “do you know how many bones you have in your feet?” the man was shaking, wide eyed, staring at him like he might be what his mask depicted, “Twenty six. That’s fifty two bones for me, none for you. Who knows, maybe I could make a wonderful charm bracelet to remind me of your lack of tact.”

“Y-you’re crazy!” the man shrieked before Hannibal pressed himself close, letting go of his cloak and covering the man’s mouth with his hand, tutting as he felt the grimy slick of his breath against his palm.

“Hush,” he said quietly, “I would hate for your swine mouth to get you into any more of a predicament. We shall leave it at this, and there it shall be left. For now.”

Will was waiting for him by the exit with the organiser who, mask removed, looked rather perturbed. There were many apologies waiting for him it seemed, about how the employee in question would be disciplined and how sorry, Dr. Lecter, how sorry we are that this inappropriate behaviour would ruin their evening.

Their journey back to the hotel in the back of a luxurious taxi was silent. Will stared out of the window. Hannibal refused to break his reverie. He wished for quiet and privacy before things became complicated.

The door, the stairs, the room key. Hannibal placed his mask back in the closet, hanging up his jacket. When he returned to the bedroom Will had left his mask on the bedside cabinet, but had taken up vigil on the sofa, elbows on knees, fingers twined to rest his chin against. Hannibal sat down on the edge of the bed, leaving them facing each other. Eventually Will deigned to divest himself, shrugging out of his jacket and waistcoat. At the very least, Hannibal thought, he seemed to be able to breathe a little easier.

“Darling?” Hannibal asked.

“I’m ok,” Will said, acidly, “I’m alright. You don’t need to apologise for me.”

“You misunderstand…”

“Do I?” Will looked up, through his lashes, grey spoiled to dark, “Is that what we are, right now?” Will stood, advancing carefully, “A misunderstanding? Is that what we’ve always been? Because you won’t let it be any other way,” he stood before him, knees pressed against the bed between Hannibal’s open legs, “You won’t let me see what exists beyond the demure smile and the expensive suits and the love you blindfold me with.”

“Perish the thought,” Hannibal, staring straight up at Will’s face, above him like a hangman’s noose.

Twin hands, long fingers familiarly calloused where Will practiced with his gun, caressed the sides of his face.

“You went after him, didn’t you.”

“Did I?”

“Don’t fucking play with me, not right now,” Will hissed, “what did you do?”

“Nothing significant.”

“Then what did you *say*?” Will grit out, “Dammit Hannibal if I had wanted to be played by my own husband on a daily basis I would have asked Jack for a ring.”

A laugh was bubbling in his throat. Hannibal managed to suppress it. Instead he decided it was a night for thirsts to be quenched. Life was coming to a head, it seemed, with or without his permission.

“I told him that if he spoke of or looked at you again I would perform and osteotomy on his feet.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m very possessive of you, darling Will. Enough that sometimes I surprise even

myself. The thought of another laying their hands upon you, it is impossible. I'd rather take those hands, stumps left red and bleeding, than risk you to their care."

"You're crazy," Will said, his words echoing the disgusting pig of a man from earlier; only Will was smirking as he said it, "you know that, don't you."

"Don't you?" Hannibal rebutted.

"Only too much."

When the shove came against his shoulders he allowed it, letting the momentum carry him back to lie against the rich blankets. Will climbed across him, lying prone beneath this crawling, wild predator. Lips kissed wherever they could find flesh, *wrist, clavicle, neck, face, lips*. Hannibal reached up to hold that slim waist, nimble fingers making quick work of the buttons at Will's fly. Undressing became part of the dance. Leaning into Will's domineering embrace Hannibal pressed close so as to look down the sleek curve of Will's back as he pushed the shirt over his shoulders and let it slide to his wrists. Pulling back enough to look down between them Hannibal undid the last button, pulled down the zip and began folding open Will's fly like origami. Fingers slid in around his hips, palms pressed against the bone, teasing a touch against the sides of his buttocks. Then hands dipped downwards and pushed, slipping the fabric along to thighs, knees. Will fussed with Hannibal's shirt buttons, eyes bright, until he was able to bear his chest to the air. Sitting astride him, Will became as sensuous and powerful as a succubus, hands pressed against his chest, fingers flexing like claws, clothes hanging along their forms like rags caught in the branches.

"You have no idea, do you," Will was murmuring against Hannibal's skin, across his collarbone, "I'm no one's china cup. Not you, not Jack, not anyone's. I need you to know you can't break me."

"Whoever would dare to try," Hannibal muttered as Will yanked at his trousers, hauling them down, nails leaving tracks across his thighs.

"Ever since I was born there's been someone willing to," Will said, voice harsh, "but you...you want to put me back together. I'm not broken, Hannibal."

"Au contraire. You are the wolf in the brush, my dear, my darling. Only the tapetum lucidum of your eyes revealing you in the darkness, baring your soul like the threat of teeth at my throat," Hannibal said huskily as Will leaned in and laved at the long line of his neck, "I wish to feel you close your jaws."

"You don't know," Will sounded like a wounded animal, desperate to be healed but too wild to allow the hand close enough to treat the haemorrhage, "you don't know what you want."

The truth of his words were in the tone, *that Hannibal knew Will was talking to himself.* Reaching over to the table Hannibal picked up the one thing that could allow Will to keep the last thread of his deception in place.

“So beautiful,” Will was whispering against the side of his face, Hannibal running his palms across Will’s porcelain skin, “you’re so beautiful to me. I don’t know. *I don’t know anything*.”

“Why don’t you show me, darling,” it was both request and demand, as Hannibal held the mask before Will like the offering of a supplicant man.

Once more grey eyes were clear, watching him as Will settled his hips, earning an aborted hiss from Hannibal’s lips. After a moment of breathing Will licked his teeth, eyes hooded as he lowered his head, elongating his neck like a faun bending to drink from a stream. Hannibal could not help but smile as Will consented, allowing his husband to slip the mask into place across his curls.

As he sat back the beauty of his form became complete. A stag rampant against the menagerie of animals wild at his back, the foxes and the wolves, the jaguar sleek and hidden. Hannibal felt the reality of his life and the fantasies of his mind palace overlapping, humming in resonance like the twin tines of a tuning fork. Will was now as he had always been in Hannibal’s eyes, a savage, exquisite phantasm, crawling and dragging himself through the dark swamps, slaking himself in the pitch tar of the world, his knees and hands scraped and cut as he peered into the dens of the dark creatures, the minds of those society could not fully understand, creeping inside in order to subsume.

To *become.*

“Happy anniversary, darling.”

It was raining outside, soft and sparse and vaguely intermittent as dark puffy clouds raced across the sky, jolting out sunshine between bouts. The only just visible tops of trees were glistening, swaying dramatically as the wind broke against the glass. On returning to his seat Hannibal let out a soft sigh at the feel of soft, plush furnishings and the taste of an exquisite cappuccino on his tongue. The table before him glinted with softly reflected light from the ceiling design, a large, stylised radial sun which encircled the bar at its centre. Hannibal was glad Will had the foresight to pack his travel wallet filled with his collection of executive cards, affording them access to the business lounge. He didn’t think that he would like to do plastic chairs and sub par fair any time again soon. If ever.

Across from him, Will was reading a newspaper and drinking what appeared to be black tea, his eyes hidden behind thick rimmed black glasses. Hannibal sipped contentedly, listening to the rustle of pages over the vague hubbub of the busy airport.

“Anything interesting?” Hannibal asked, watching as two children sprinted past the glass, their harassed parents running along behind them.

“Not really,” Will said, stifling a yawn with the back of his left hand, “I’m guessing you’ve been to the check-in desks.”

“I hate to override your generosity, but I refuse to perform any more contortions in order to achieve comfort for eight hours. They have upgraded us to business class.”

The paper rustled as Will turned the page, setting it out flat on the table so as to lean with his forearms flat against the polished wood. He scratched at his left wrist.

“It’s ok. I don’t mind. To be fair, I wasn’t looking forward to it either. The food was garbage. And, not that I don’t love you,” Will was smirking, “but your head is heavy.”

“Should I take it as a compliment or an insult?” Hannibal asked, brow raised.

“Whatever you like,” Will said inconclusively, taking a drink.

It had been too hopeful to expect things to have gone back to normal so soon, it seemed. Hannibal sighed, retrieving his phone from his pocket and checking the time. Standing up to leave he flicked through his contact’s list. Will stayed silent, continuing to read as Hannibal pushed open the glass door and left the lounge. The noisy airport announced itself as he did so, making him feel slightly more impatient than usual as he waited to be connected.

“Good afternoon, Lisa speaking,” came a sprightly voice from the endless ringing, “how may I help you?”

“Good afternoon, I would like to speak with my uncle please.”

“Oh, yes, is this Hannibal?” he felt his eyes narrow, “I was told to expect your call. Please hold.”

That was interesting, he thought coldly. The hold music was slightly shrill in his ear, the signal wavering. He moved a few feet to his right and waited. When the music stopped there was no acknowledgement. For a full ten seconds the call was dead air.

“It is good to know that mind games run in the family,” Hannibal took the initiative and spoke first, “how did you know he would tell me?”

“What do you mean by that?” came a crisp, haughty voice, withered with age; Hannibal realised it had been nearly a decade now that he hadn’t heard his uncle speak. Time was like the plastic seats, the plastic menus, it melted with heat, stretched, solidified, malleable. Hannibal liked to think time did not factor into their feud as a stable construct.

“I assume you asked Will to keep this interaction between you both to himself, yet you were expecting my call.”

“I could see it in his eyes,” Robert said, agitated but tired, “he’s in love with you, the poor fool. I’d ask why you’re bothering with all this pretence but it seems pointless, doesn’t it?”

“And here I thought that was my favourite trait of yours. Pointlessness. I would ask, why now? Is there some sort of terminal situation I am unaware of? Are you absolving yourself of your sins before you meet Michael at the gates?”

A short, derisive laugh, “It’s disgusting to hear you talk of religion. What god would allow you absolution? You never did have any sympathy for those around you, even family. How could you hope to have one of your own that you wouldn’t torture and ruin. If I could say I saved even one innocent from your black hands it would be worth it.”

It had surely been a long time since he had laughed so genuinely, with such good cause. He could almost tell that the silence on the other end of the phone was fiercely angry, impotently so. Slipping his left hand into the pocket of his suit trousers Hannibal looked back through the glass door at Will, oblivious to him as he turned another page.

“Innocence is surely something you have never known, if you are to assume it of anyone who is simply not myself. Your mundane world filled with inherited morality is the true poison that cuts you into distinct, little pieces, leaving you severed from what matters. Why do you think she turned to me for solace in the first place?”

“How dare y..!” the shout started, cut off simply.

“I steal from you everything that matters not because of good or evil, but because you cannot understand the truth of is or is not. A foreign concept, a simplicity of the universe that has side stepped your need for a higher power, absolving you of your sins. Something that keeps you small and servile.”

“I used to love you, once,” he sounded so wonderfully resentful, underpinned by deep, satisfying regret, “you were always a strange boy, but for the sake of my brother, god rest his soul, I loved you like a son! This is all since that fucking pervert teacher buggered you when you were thirteen, turned you wrong. I wish she’d never let me send you abroad for your schooling.”

The lack of understanding or scope of his character was astounding, enough to garner a smile. Hannibal turned his gaze from Will outwards to look at the concourse, watch the docile pigs trotting by as he listened to the translated squeals and grunts from the phone.

“To think that my own family could be so blind, it’s shameful,” Hannibal sighed, “I suppose there’s no need to continue this farce?”

“I wish I could end this,” his voice was shaking, with rage or with frailty Hannibal didn’t truly care, “she would never forgive me if I did!”

“There is probably no need to, but on the off chance that you do not understand fully let me explain,” Hannibal said casually, “if you contact my husband again I will not hold myself accountable for my actions, and neither will Murasaki. Unlike you, I have the luxury of not needing to care about her judgement. Not any longer.”

“Perhaps, after all these years, it is what I deserve,” Robert sounded defeated but indignant.

“I could let you choose how it would happen,” Hannibal said, “I’m feeling charitable.”

“God help me,” there was a choke of tears in his throat that made Hannibal look up to the ceiling with bored disdain, “I deserve this.”

“Snivelling little swine,” Hannibal said, fed up; his uncle’s self deprecation was gross and tasteless, “I really have no time for this. Whatever it is that eats at you, I hope it takes you soon. Soul and all. What’s left of it.”

He hung up, irritated with himself that he had let the old man weep on for so long. Wished he could have ended it on a higher note. Still, he was sure his point had been made. Later, he thought, later he would see if he felt like taking care of the man personally. On returning to the their table Hannibal sat down, unable to hide his irritation. Taking a sip of his cappuccino he found it lukewarm, lips twitching as he put it back into its saucer.

“Who were you calling?” Will asked, still refusing to look up from the pages beneath his face.

“Who do you think?”

“I hope I didn’t cause a rift.”

“No more than already existed,” Hannibal said truthfully; for a full minute he sat and watched Will read, waiting for the man to look at him. When it did not happen Hannibal looked over Will’s shoulder and spoke, “I hope I have not created a similar fault line between us.”

It got him what he wanted, at least. Will looked up, taking off his glasses, a soft frown above a small smile.

“Why would you think that?” Will asked sincerely.

“Have I misjudged?” Hannibal asked, “I thought I had done something wrong.”

“I just have a lot on my mind,” Will shrugged, “I’m not mad at you. Just needed to take a minute to think, that’s all.”

“And your conclusion?” Hannibal asked, trying to curb his expectancy.

“That it’s fine,” Will said, putting his glasses back on and looking down at the paper, “everything’s going to be fine.”

It was Hannibal’s third nightshift in a row, and Will was beginning to hate eating dinner alone. During the day he barely saw his husband, either asleep or busy.

He was sure he had caught something. He blamed the plane, the recycled air and people crammed in together tightly enough to pass germs along like a daisy chain. His mood had been low, his thoughts scrambled and finding it difficult to focus. He just hoped it wouldn’t turn into a full blown flu, not with the deadlines he had.

It was the third morning in a row he’d woken up in a rush, the remnants of some horrible nightmare clinging to him as he was forced to run to the bathroom, drop to his knees and vomit. Will gripped the side of the sink and swished the foul tasting water around his mouth before spitting and repeating, wiping away the feel of sweat at his brow. Looking up he stared at himself in the mirror and wondered if he should call Hannibal and let him know in case he was ill too and…

Stopped dead. Suddenly everything stopped. Staring at himself Will blinked, his eyes becoming focused, flicking around as his brain tried to comprehend the *sudden stop*.

“Fucking kidding me,” he whispered to himself, looking down, trying to quickly calculate dates.

He was dressed, out the door and in the car in three minutes. Later he would be surprised that he wasn’t pulled over for speeding considering he could hear his tires squealing on the asphalt as he searched for a parking space outside the pharmacy. There were only a couple of people in this early, allowing Will free reign to hurry past isles of feminine hygiene, dental care, shampoo and body wash...

The pharmacist behind the counter gave him an incredulous smile as he put all twelve pregnancy tests on the counter.

“I don’t care how much it’s going to cost,” Will cut her off as she opened her mouth, “just ring them up.”

“Sure thing,” she said, shrugging.

Will thought the most ludicrous thing he might have done in the whole process was lock himself in the bathroom. The empty house judged his mania, even as he set about pacing the long bathroom with the first box in his right hand as he read the instructions, his left at his mouth to chew at his fingernails. One after another, Will waited and then stared. Waited and then stared. Thirty minutes later he found himself sitting on the side of the bath, the most recent test in his hands.

Two red lines stared up at him. Will stared straight back. Standing up slowly he shuffled to the sink and threw the test in with the rest, jumbled like a mess of twigs, the same result on every one.

As he closed his eyes, the memory of that night replayed. *Below him, Hannibal rapt, eyes not leaving Will even as he’d torn off the mask and thrown it to the ground, hips moving almost without his consent.* The beauty of their truth, made manifest.

Leaning forwards let the cool mirror touch his feverish forehead. Will Graham found himself smiling, then laughing, then tears began to well at his scrunched closed eyes. When he opened them the tears fell, splashing onto the jumble of tests in his sink.

“*Finally.”*

Chapter End Notes

The story about booking the little Japanese cafe is a true story from my mum and stepdad's visit to Paris. She said that, despite the sheer mortification, it was the best food she had while there.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!